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Charles Dickens

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RALPH MAKES ONE LAST APPOINTMENT—AND KEEPS IT.

Nicholas Nickleby, Part II
—p. 820

THE WORKS OF
CHARLES DICKENS

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

Part II

HARD TIMES

ILLUSTRATED

WITH INTRODUCTIONS, CRITICAL
COMMENTS, AND NOTES BY
ANDREW LANG, G. K. CHESTERTON
JOHN FORSTER
ADOLPHUS WM. WARD
WALTER JERROLD
CHARLES DICKENS THE YOUNGER
AND OTHERS

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CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN WHICH ANOTHER OLD FRIEND ENCOUNTERS SMIKE, VERY OPPORTUNELY AND TO SOME PURPOSE.

The night fraught with so much bitterness to one poor soul had given place to a bright and cloudless summer morning, when a north-country mail-coach traversed with cheerful noise the yet silent streets of Islington, and, giving brisk note of its approach with the lively winding of the guard's horn, clattered onward to its halting-place hard by the Post-office.

The only outside passenger was a burly honest-looking countryman upon the box, who, with his eyes fixed upon the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, appeared so wrapt in admiring wonder, as to be quite insensible to all the bustle of getting out the bags and parcels, until one of the coach windows being let sharply down, he looked around and encountered a pretty female face which was just then thrust out.

"See there, lass!" bawled the countryman, pointing towards the object of his admiration. "There be Paul's Church. 'Ecod, he be a soizable 'un, he be."

"Goodness, John! I shouldn't have thought it could have been half the size. What a monster!"

"Monsther!—Ye're aboot right theer, I reckon, Mrs. Browdie," said the countryman good-humouredly, as he came slowly down in his huge top-coat, "and wa'at dost thee tak yon place to be noo—thot 'un ower the wa'. Ye'd never coom near it 'gin ye thried for twolve moonths. It's na' but a Poast-office. Ho! ho! They need to charge for dooble-latthers. A Poast-office! Wa'at dost thee think o' thot? 'Ecod, if thot's on'y a Poast-office, I'd loike to see where the Lord Mayor o' Lunnun lives."

So saying, John Browdie—for he it was—opened the coach-door, and tapping Mrs. Browdie, late Miss Price, on the cheek as he looked in, burst into a boisterous fit of laughter.

"Weel!" said John—"Dang my bootuns if she bean't asleep agean!"

"She's been asleep all night, and was all yesterday, except for a minute or two now and then," replied John Browdie's choice, "and I was very sorry when she woke, for she has been *so* cross!"

The subject of these remarks was a slumbering figure, so muffled in shawl and cloak that it would have been matter of impossibility to guess at its sex but for a brown-beaver bonnet and green veil which ornamented the head, and which, having been crushed and flattened for two hundred and fifty miles in that particular angle of the vehicle from which the lady's snores now proceeded, presented an appearance sufficiently ludicrous to have moved less risible muscles than those of John Browdie's ruddy face.

"Hollo!" cried John, twitching one end of the dragged veil. "Coom, wakken oop, will 'ee."

After several burrowings into the old corner, and many exclamations of impatience and fatigue, the figure struggled into a sitting posture; and there, under a mass of crumpled beaver, and surrounded by a semicircle of blue curl-papers, were the delicate features of Miss Fanny Squeers.

"Oh, 'Tilda!" cried Miss Squeers, "How you have been kicking of me through this blessed night!"

"Well, I do like that," replied her friend, laughing, "when you have had nearly the whole coach to yourself."

"Don't deny it, 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, impressively, "because you have, and it's no use to go attempting to say you haven't. You mightn't have known it in your sleep, 'Tilda, but I haven't closed my eyes for a single wink, and so I *think* I am to be believed."

With which reply, Miss Squeers adjusted the bonnet and veil, which nothing but supernatural interference and an utter suspension of nature's laws could have reduced to any shape or form; and evidently flattering herself that it looked uncommonly neat, brushed off the sandwich-crumbs and bits of biscuit which had accumulated in her lap, and availing herself of John Browdie's proffered arm, descended from the coach.

"Noo," said John, when a hackney-coach had been called, and the ladies and the luggage hurried in, "gang to the Sarah's Head, mun."

"To the *vere?*" cried the coachman.

"Lawk, Mr. Browdie!" interrupted Miss Squeers. "The idea! Saracen's Head."

"Sure-ly," said John, "I know'd it was summut aboot Sarah—to the Sarah Son's Head. Dost thou know thot?"

"Oh, ah—I know that," replied the coachman gruffly, as he banged the door.

"'Tilda, dear—really," remonstrated Miss Squeers, "we shall be taken for I don't know what."

"Let 'em tak' us as they foind us," said John Browdie; "we dean't come to Lunnun to do nought but 'joy oursel, do we?"

"I hope not, Mr. Browdie," replied Miss Squeers, looking singularly dismal.

"Well, then," said John, "it's no matther. I've only been a married mun fower days, 'account of poor old feyther deein' and puttin' it off. Here be a weddin' party—broide and broide'smaid, and the groom—if a mun dean't 'joy himsel noo, when ought he, hey? Drat it all, thot's what I wont to know."

So, in order that he might begin to enjoy himself at once, and lose no time, Mr. Browdie gave his wife a hearty kiss, and succeeded in wresting another from Miss Squeers after a maidenly resistance of scratching and struggling on the part of that young lady, which was not quite over when they reached the Saracen's Head.

Here the party straightway retired to rest, the refreshment of sleep being necessary after so long a journey; and here they met again about noon, to a substantial breakfast, spread by direction of Mr. John Browdie, in a small private room up-stairs commanding an uninterrupted view of the stables.

To have seen Miss Squeers now, divested of the brown beaver, the green veil, and the blue curl-papers, and arrayed in all the virgin splendour of a white frock and spencer, with a white muslin bonnet, and an imitative damask rose in full bloom on the inside thereof; her luxuriant crop of hair arranged in curls so tight that it was impossible they could come out by any accident, and her bonnet-cap trimmed with little damask roses, which might be supposed to be so many promising scions of the big one—to have seen all this, and to have seen the broad damask belt, matching both the family rose and the little ones, which encircled her slender waist, and by a happy ingenuity took off from the shortness of the

spencer behind,—to have beheld all this, and to have taken further into account the coral bracelets (rather short of beads, and with a very visible black string) which clasped her wrists, and the coral necklace which rested on her neck, supporting outside her frock a lonely cornelian heart, typical of her own disengaged affections—to have contemplated all these mute but expressive appeals to the purest feelings of our nature, might have thawed the frost of age, and added new and inextinguishable fuel to the fire of youth.

The waiter was touched. Waiter as he was, he had human passions and feelings, and he looked very hard at Miss Squeers as he handed the muffins.

"Is my pa in, do you know?" asked Miss Squeers with dignity.

"Beg your pardon, Miss,"

"My pa," repeated Miss Squeers; "is he in?"

"In where, Miss?"

"In here—in the house!" replied Miss Squeers. "My pa—Mr. Wackford Squeers—he's stopping here. Is he at home?"

"I didn't know that there was any gen'l'man of that name in the house, Miss," replied the waiter. "There may be, in the coffee-room."

May be. Very pretty this, indeed! Here was Miss Squeers, who had been depending all the way to London upon showing her friends how much at home she would be, and how much respectful notice her name and connexions would excite, told that her father *might* be there! "As if he was a feller!" observed Miss Squeers, with emphatic indignation.

"Ye'd betther inquire, mun," said John Browdie. "An' hond up another pigeon-pie, will 'ee? Dang the chap," muttered John, looking into the empty dish as the waiter retired; "Does he ca' this a pie—three yoong pigeons and a troifling matther o' steak, and a crust so loight that you doant know when it's in your mooth and when it's gane? I wonder hoo many pies goes to a breakfast!"

After a short interval, which John Browdie employed upon the ham and a cold round of beef, the waiter returned with another pie, and the information that Mr. Squeers was not stopping in the house, but that he came there every day, and that directly he arrived he should be shown upstairs. With this he retired; and he had not retired two

minutes, when he returned with Mr. Squeers and his hopeful son.

"Why, who'd have thought of this?" said Mr. Squeers, when he had saluted the party, and received some private family intelligence from his daughter.

"Who, indeed, pa!" replied the young lady, spitefully. "But you see 'Tilda *is* married at last."

"And I stond threat for a soight o' Lunnun, schoolmeasther," said John, vigorously attacking the pie.

"One of them things that young men do when they get married," returned Squeers, "and as runs through with their money like nothing at all. How much better wouldn't it be now, to save it up for the eddication of any little boys, for instance. They come on you," said Mr. Squeers in a moralizing way, "before you're aware of it; mine did upon me."

"Will 'ee pick a bit?" said John.

"I won't myself," returned Squeers; "but if you'll just let little Wackford tuck into something fat, I'll be obliged to you. Give it him in his fingers, else the waiter charges it on, and there's lot of profit on this sort of vittles without that. If you hear the waiter coming, Sir, shove it in your pocket and look out of the window, d'ye hear?"

"I'm awake, father," replied the dutiful Wackford.

"Well," said Squeers, turning to his daughter, "It's your turn to be married next. You must make haste."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry," said Miss Squeers, very sharply.

"No, Fanny?" cried her old friend with some archness.

"No, 'Tilda," replied Miss Squeers, shaking her head vehemently. "*I*—can wait."

"So can the young men, it seems, Fanny," observed Mrs. Browdie.

"They an't draw'd into it by *me*, 'Tilda," retorted Miss Squeers.

"No," returned her friend; "that's exceedingly true."

The sarcastic tone of this reply might have provoked a rather acrimonious retort from Miss Squeers, who, besides being of a constitutionally vicious temper—aggravated just now by travel and recent jolting—was somewhat irritated by old recollections and the failure of her own designs upon Mr. Browdie; and the acrimonious retort might have led to a great many other retorts, which might have led to Heaven knows what, if the subject of conversation had not

been at that precise moment accidentally changed by Mr. Squeers himself.

"What do you think?" said that gentleman; "who do you suppose we have laid hands on, Wackford and me?"

"Pa! not Mr.——?" Miss Squeers was unable to finish the sentence, but Mrs. Browdie did it for her, and added, "Nickleby?"

"No," said Squeers. "But next door to him though."

"You can't mean Smike?" cried Miss Squeers, clapping her hands.

"Yes, I can though," rejoined her father. "I've got him, hard and fast."

"Wa'at!" exclaimed John Browdie, pushing away his plate. "Got thot poor—dom'd scoondrel,—where?"

"Why, in the top back room, at my lodging," replied Squeers, "with him on one side and the key on the other."

"At thy loodgin'! Thee'st gotten him at thy loodgin'? Ho! ho! The schoolmeasther agin all England. Give us thee hond, mun;—I'm darned but I must shak thee by the hond for thot.—Gotten him at thy loodgin'?"

"Yes," replied Squeers, staggering in his chair under the congratulatory blow on the chest which the stout Yorkshireman dealt him—"thankee. Don't do it again. You mean it kindly, I know, but it hurts rather—yes, there he is. That's not so bad, is it?"

"Ba'ad!" repeated John Browdie. "It's eneaf to scare a mun to hear tell on."

"I thought it would surprise you a bit," said Squeers, rubbing his hands. "It was pretty neatly done, and pretty quick too."

"Hoo wor it?" inquired John, sitting down close to him. "Tell us all aboot it, mun; coom, quick."

Although he could not keep pace with John Browdie's impatience, Mr. Squeers related the lucky chance by which Smike had fallen into his hands, as quickly as he could, and, except when he was interrupted by the admiring remarks of his auditors, paused not in the recital until he had brought it to an end.

"For fear he should give me the slip by any chance," observed Squeers, when he had finished, looking very cunning, "I've taken three outsides for to-morrow morning, for Wackford and him and me, and have arranged to leave the accounts and the new boys to the agent, don't you see?

So it's very lucky you come to-day, or you'd have missed us; and as it is, unless you could come and tea with me to-night, we shan't see anything more of you before we go away."

"Dean't say anoother wurd," returned the Yorkshireman, shaking him by the hand. "We'd coom if it was twonty mile."

"No, would you though?" returned Mr. Squeers, who had not expected quite such a ready acceptance of his invitation, or he would have considered twice before he gave it.

John Browdie's only reply was another squeeze of the hand, and an assurance that they would not begin to see London till to-morrow, so that they might be at Mr. Snawley's at six o'clock without fail; and after some further conversation, Mr. Squeers and his son departed.

During the remainder of the day Mr. Browdie was in a very odd and excitable state, bursting occasionally into an explosion of laughter, and then taking up his hat and running into the coachyard to have it out by himself. He was very restless too, constantly walking in and out, and snapping his fingers, and dancing scraps of uncouth country dances, and, in short, conducting himself in such a very extraordinary manner, that Miss Squeers opined he was going mad, and, begging her dear 'Tilda not to distress herself, communicated her suspicions in so many words. Mrs. Browdie, however, without discovering any great alarm, observed that she had seen him so once before, and that although he was almost sure to be ill after it, it would not be anything very serious, and therefore he was better left alone.

The result proved her to be perfectly correct; for while they were all sitting in Mr. Snawley's parlour that night, and just as it was beginning to get dusk, John Browdie was taken so ill, and seized with such an alarming dizziness in the head, that the whole company were thrown into the utmost consternation. His good lady, indeed, was the only person present who retained presence of mind enough to observe that if he were allowed to lie down on Mr. Squeers's bed for an hour or so, and left entirely to himself, he would be sure to recover again almost as quickly as he had been taken ill. Nobody could refuse to try the effect of so reasonable a proposal before sending for a surgeon. Accordingly,

John was supported up-stairs with great difficulty, being a monstrous weight, and regularly tumbling down two steps every time they hoisted him up three; and being laid on the bed, was left in charge of his wife, who after a short interval re-appeared in the parlour with the gratifying intelligence that he had fallen fast asleep.

Now, the fact was, that, at that particular moment, John Browdie was sitting on the bed with the reddest face ever seen, cramming the corner of the pillow into his mouth to prevent his roaring out loud with laughter. He had no sooner succeeded in suppressing his emotion, than he slipped off his shoes, and creeping to the adjoining room where the prisoner was confined, turned the key, which was on the outside, and darting in, covered Smike's mouth with his huge hand before he could utter a sound.

"Ods-bobs, dost thee not know me, mun?" whispered the Yorkshireman to the bewildered lad. "Browdie,—chap as met thee efther schoolmeasther was banged?"

"Yes, yes," cried Smike. "Oh! help me."

"Help thee!" replied John, stopping his mouth again the instant he had said thus much. "Thee didn't need help if thee warn't as silly yoongster as ever draw'd breath. Wa'at did 'ee come here for, then?"

"He brought me; oh! he brought me," cried Smike.

"Brout thee!" replied John. "Why didn't 'ee punch his head, or lay theeself doon and kick, and squeal out for the pollis? I'd ha' licked a doozen such as him when I was yoong as thee. But thee be'est a poor broken-doon chap," said John, sadly, "and God forgi' me for bragging ower yan o' his weakest creeturs."

Smike opened his mouth to speak, but John Browdie stopped him.

"Stan' still," said the Yorkshireman, "and doant'ee speak a morsel o' talk till I tell'ee."

With this caution, John Browdie shook his head significantly, and, drawing a screw-driver from his pocket, took off the box of the lock in a very deliberate and workmanlike manner, and laid it, together with the implement, on the floor.

"See thot?" said John. "Thot be thy doin'. Noo, coot awa'."

Smike looked vacantly at him, as if unable to comprehend his meaning.

"I say, coot awa'," repeated John, hastily. "Dost thee

know where thee livest? Thee dost? Weel. Are yon thy clothes, or schoolmeasther's?"

"Mine," replied Smike, as the Yorkshireman hurried him to the adjoining room, and pointed out a pair of shoes and a coat which were lying on a chair.

"On wi' 'em," said John, forcing the wrong arm into the wrong sleeve, and winding the tails of the coat round the fugitive's neck. "Noo, foller me, and when thee get'st ootside door, turn to the right, and they wean't see thee pass."

"But—but—he'll hear me shut the door," replied Smike, trembling from head to foot.

"Then dean't shut it at all," retorted John Browdie. "Dang it, thee bean't afeard o' schoolmeasther's takkin cold, I hope?"

"N-no," said Smike, his teeth chattering in his head. "But he brought me back before, and he will again. He will, he will indeed."

"He wull, he wull!" replied John impatiently. "He wean't, he wean't. Look'ee. I wont to do this neighbourly loike, and let them think thee's gotten awa' o' theeself, but if he comes oot o' thot parlour awhiles thee'rt clearing off, he mun' have mercy on his oun boans, for I wean't. If he foinds it oot soon efther, I'll put 'un on a wrong scent, I warrant 'ee. But if thee keep'st a good hart, thee'lt be at whoam afore they know thee'st gotten off. Coom."

Smike, who comprehended just enough of this to know it was intended as encouragement, prepared to follow with tottering steps, when John whispered in his ear.

"Thee'lt just tell yoong Measther, that I'm sploiced to 'Tilly Price, and to be heerd on at the Saracen by latther, and that I bean't jealous of 'un—dang it, I'm loike to boost when I think o' that neight; 'cod, I think I see 'un now, a powderin' awa' at the thin bread an' butther!"

It was rather a ticklish recollection for John just then, for he was within an ace of breaking out into a loud guffaw. Restraining himself, however, just in time, by a great effort, he glided down stairs, hauling Smike behind him; and placing himself close to the parlour-door, to confront the first person that might come out, signed to him to make off.

Having got so far, Smike needed no second bidding. Opening the house-door gently, and casting a look of min-

gled gratitude and terror at his deliverer, he took the direction which had been indicated to him, and sped away like the wind.

The Yorkshireman remained on his post for a few minutes, but, finding that there was no pause in the conversation inside, crept back again unheard, and stood listening over the stair-rail for a full hour. Everything remaining perfectly quiet, he got into Mr. Squeers's bed once more, and drawing the clothes over his head, laughed till he was nearly smothered.

If there could only have been somebody by, to see how the bed-clothes shook, and to see the Yorkshireman's great red face and round head appear above the sheets every now and then, like some jovial monster coming to the surface to breathe, and once more dive down convulsed with the laughter which came bursting forth afresh—that somebody would have been scarcely less amused than John Browdie himself.

CHAPTER XL.

IN WHICH NICHOLAS FALLS IN LOVE. HE EMPLOYS A MEDIATOR, WHOSE PROCEEDINGS ARE CROWNED WITH UNEXPECTED SUCCESS, EXCEPTING IN ONE SOLITARY PARTICULAR.

Once more out of the clutches of his old persecutor, it needed no fresh stimulation to call forth the utmost energy and exertion that Smike was capable of summoning to his aid. Without pausing for a moment to reflect upon the course he was taking, or the probability of its leading him homewards or the reverse, he fled away with surprising swiftness and constancy of purpose, borne upon such wings as only Fear can wear, and impelled by imaginary shouts in the well-remembered voice of Squeers, who, with a host of pursuers, seemed to the poor fellow's disordered senses to press hard upon his track; now left at a greater distance in the rear, and now gaining faster and faster upon him, as the alterations of hope and terror agitated him by turns. Long after he had become assured that these sounds were but the creation of his excited brain, he still held on at a

pace, which even weakness and exhaustion could scarcely retard; and it was not until the darkness and quiet of a country road recalled him to a sense of external objects, and the starry sky above warned him of the rapid flight of time, that, covered with dust and panting for breath, he stopped to listen and look about him.

All was still and silent. A glare of light in the distance, casting a warm glow upon the sky, marked where the huge city lay. Solitary fields, divided by hedges and ditches, through many of which he had crashed and scrambled in his flight, skirted the road, both by the way he had come and upon the opposite side. It was late now. They could scarcely trace him by such paths as he had taken, and if he could hope to regain his own dwelling, it must surely be at such a time as that, and under cover of the darkness. This by degrees became pretty plain even to the mind of Smike. He had at first entertained some vague and childish idea of travelling into the country for ten or a dozen miles, and then returning homewards by a wide circuit, which should keep him clear of London—so great was his apprehension of traversing the streets alone, lest he should again encounter his dreaded enemy—but, yielding to the conviction which these thoughts inspired, he turned back, and taking the open road, though not without many fears and misgivings, made for London again with scarcely less speed of foot than that with which he had left the temporary abode of Mr. Squeers.

By the time he re-entered it at the western extremity, the greater part of the shops were closed; of the throngs of people who had been tempted abroad after the heat of the day, but few remained in the streets, and they were lounging home. But of these he asked his way from time to time, and by dint of repeated inquiries he at length reached the dwelling of Newman Noggs.

All that evening Newman had been hunting and searching in by-ways and corners for the very person who now knocked at his door, while Nicholas had been pursuing the same inquiry in other directions. He was sitting with a melancholy air at his poor supper, when Smike's timorous and uncertain knock reached his ears. Alive to every sound in his anxious and expectant state, Newman hurried down stairs, and, uttering a cry of joyful surprise, dragged the welcome visitor into the passage and up the stairs, and

said not a word until he had him safe in his own garret and the door was shut behind them, when he mixed a great mugfull of gin and water, and holding it to Smike's mouth, as one might hold a bowl of medicine to the lips of a refractory child, commanded him to drain it to the very last drop.

Newman looked uncommonly blank when he found that Smike did little more than put his lips to the precious mixture; he was in the act of raising the mug to his own mouth with a deep sigh of compassion for his poor friend's weakness, when Smike, beginning to relate the adventures which had befallen him, arrested him half-way, and he stood listening with the mug in his hand.

It was odd enough to see the change that came over Newman as Smike proceeded. At first he stood rubbing his lips with the back of his hand, as a preparatory ceremony towards composing himself for a draught; then, at the mention of Squeers, he took the mug under his arm, and opening his eyes very wide, looked on in the utmost astonishment. When Smike came to the assault upon himself in the hackney-coach, he hastily deposited the mug upon the table, and limped up and down the room in a state of the greatest excitement, stopping himself with a jerk every now and then as if to listen more attentively. When John Browdie came to be spoken of, he dropped by slow and gradual degrees into a chair, and rubbing his hands upon his knees—quicker and quicker as the story reached its climax—burst at last into a laugh composed of one loud sonorous "Ha! ha!" Having given vent to which, his countenance immediately fell again as he inquired, with the utmost anxiety, whether it was probable that John Browdie and Squeers had come to blows.

"No! I think not," replied Smike. "I don't think he could have missed me till I got quite away."

Newman scratched his head with a show of great disappointment, and once more lifting up the mug, applied himself to the contents, smiling meanwhile over the rim with a grim and ghastly smile at Smike.

"You shall stay here," said Newman; "you're tired—fagged. I'll tell them you're come back. They have been half mad about you. Mr. Nicholas——"

"God bless him!" cried Smike.

"Amen!" returned Newman. "He hasn't had a min-

ute's rest or peace; no more has the old lady, nor Miss Nickleby."

"No, no. Has *she* thought about me?" said Smike. "Has she though? O, has she, has she—— Don't tell me so, if she has not."

"She has," cried Newman. "She is as noble-hearted as she is beautiful."

"Yes, yes!" cried Smike. "Well said!"

"So mild and gentle," said Newman.

"Yes, yes!" cried Smike, with increasing eagerness.

"And yet with such a true and gallant spirit," pursued Newman.

He was going on in his enthusiasm, when, chancing to look at his companion, he saw that he had covered his face with his hands, and that tears were stealing out between his fingers.

A moment before, the boy's eyes were sparkling with unwonted fire, and every feature had been lighted up with an excitement which made him appear for the moment quite a different being.

"Well, well," muttered Newman, as if he was a little puzzled. "It has touched *me* more than once, to think such a nature should have been exposed to such trials; this poor fellow—yes, yes,—he feels that too—it softens him—makes him think of his former misery. Hah! That's it! Yes, that's—hum!"

It was by no means clear from the tone of these broken reflections that Newman Noggs considered them as explaining, at all satisfactorily, the emotion which had suggested them. He sat in a musing attitude for some time, regarding Smike occasionally with an anxious and doubtful glance, which sufficiently showed that he was not very remotely connected with his thoughts.

At length he repeated his proposition that Smike should remain where he was for that night, and that he (Noggs) should straightway repair to the cottage to relieve the suspense of the family. But as Smike would not hear of this, pleading his anxiety to see his friends again, they eventually sallied forth together; and the night being by this time far advanced, and Smike being besides so footsore that he could hardly crawl along, it was within an hour of sunrise when they reached their destination.

At the first sound of their voices outside the house,

Nicholas, who had passed a sleepless night, devising schemes for the recovery of his lost charge, started from his bed and joyfully admitted them. There was so much noisy conversation and congratulation and indignation, that the remainder of the family were soon awakened, and Smike received a warm and cordial welcome, not only from Kate, but from Mrs. Nickleby also, who assured him of her future favour and regard; and was so obliging as to relate, for his entertainment and that of the assembled circle, a most remarkable account extracted from some work the name of which she had never known, of a miraculous escape from some prison, but what one she couldn't remember, effected by an officer whose name she had forgotten, confined for some crime which she didn't clearly recollect.

At first Nicholas was disposed to give his uncle credit for some portion of this bold attempt (which had so nearly proved successful) to carry off Smike, but on more mature consideration he was inclined to think that the full merit of it rested with Mr. Squeers. Determined to ascertain if he could, through John Browdie, how the case really stood, he betook himself to his daily occupation: meditating as he went on a great variety of schemes for the punishment of the Yorkshire schoolmaster, all of which had their foundation in the strictest principles of retributive justice, and had but the one drawback of being wholly impracticable.

"A fine morning, Mr. Linkinwater," said Nicholas, entering the office.

"Ah!" replied Tim, "talk of the country, indeed! What do you think of this for a day—a London day—eh?"

"It's a little clearer out of town," said Nicholas.

"Clearer!" echoed Tim Linkinwater. "You should see it from my bed-room window."

"You should see it from *mine*," replied Nicholas, with a smile.

"Pooh! pooh!" said Tim Linkinwater, "don't tell me. Country!" (Bow was quite a rustic place to Tim.) "Nonsense. What can you get in the country but new-laid eggs and flowers? I can buy new-laid eggs in Leadenhall Market any morning before breakfast; and as to the flowers, it's worth a run up-stairs to smell my mignonette, or to see the double-wallflower in the back-attic window, at No. 6, in the court."

"There is a double-wallflower at No. 6, in the court, is there?" said Nicholas.

"Yes, is there," replied Tim, "and planted in a cracked jug, without a spout. There were hyacinths there this last spring, blossoming in——but you'll laugh at that, of course."

"At what?"

"At their blossoming in old blacking-bottles," said Tim.

"Not I, indeed," returned Nicholas.

Tim looked wistfully at him for a moment, as if he were encouraged by the tone of this reply to be more communicative on the subject; and sticking behind his ear a pen that he had been making, and shutting up his knife with a smart click, said,

"They belong to a sickly bed-ridden hump-backed boy, and seem to be the only pleasures, Mr. Nickleby, of his sad existence. How many years is it," said Tim, pondering, "since I first noticed him quite a little child, dragging himself about on a pair of tiny crutches? Well! Well! Not many; but though they would appear nothing, if I thought of other things, they seem a long long time, when I think of him. It is a sad thing," said Tim, breaking off, "to see a little deformed child sitting apart from other children, who are active and merry, watching the games he is denied the power to share in. He made my heart ache very often."

"It is a good heart," said Nicholas, "that disentangles itself from the close avocations of every day, to heed such things. You were saying——"

"That the flowers belonged to this poor boy," said Tim, "that's all. When it is fine weather, and he can crawl out of bed, he draws a chair close to the window, and sits there looking at them, and arranging them all day long. We used to nod at first, and then we came to speak. Formerly, when I called to him of a morning, and asked him how he was, he would smile, and say, 'better;' but now he shakes his head, and only bends more closely over his old plants. It must be dull to watch the dark house-tops and the flying clouds for so many months; but he is very patient."

"Is there nobody in the house to cheer or help him?" asked Nicholas.

"His father lives there I believe," replied Tim, "and other people too; but no one seems to care much for the poor

sickly cripple. I have asked him very often if I could do nothing for him; his answer is always the same,—'Nothing.' His voice has grown weak of late, but I can *see* that he makes the old reply. He can't leave his bed now, so they have moved it close beside the window, and there he lies all day: now looking at the sky, and now at his flowers, which he still makes shift to trim and water with his own thin hands. At night, when he sees my candle, he draws back his curtain, and leaves it so till I am in bed. It seems such company to him to know that I am here, that I often sit at my window for an hour or more, that he may see I am still awake; and sometimes I get up in the night to look at the dull melancholy light in his little room, and wonder whether he is awake or sleeping."

"The night will not be long coming," said Tim, "when he will sleep and never wake again on earth. We have never so much as shaken hands in all our lives; and yet I shall miss him like an old friend. Are there any country flowers that could interest me like these, do you think? Or do you suppose that the withering of a hundred kinds of the choicest flowers that blow, called by the hardest Latin names that were ever invented, would give me one fraction of the pain that I shall feel when those old jugs and bottles are swept away as lumber? Country!" cried Tim, with a contemptuous emphasis; "don't you know that I couldn't have such a court under my bed-room window anywhere but in London?"

With which inquiry, Tim turned his back, and pretending to be absorbed in his accounts, took an opportunity of hastily wiping his eyes when he supposed Nicholas was looking another way.

Whether it was that Tim's accounts were more than usually intricate that morning, or whether it was that his habitual serenity had been a little disturbed by these recollections, it so happened that when Nicholas returned from executing some commissions, and inquired whether Mr. Charles Cheeryble was alone in his room, Tim promptly, and without the smallest hesitation, replied in the affirmative, although somebody had passed into the room not ten minutes before, and Tim took especial and particular pride in preventing any intrusion on either of the brothers when they were engaged with any visitor whatever.

"I'll take this letter to him at once," said Nicholas, "if

that's the case." And with that he walked to the room and knocked at the door.

No answer.

Another knock and still no answer.

"He can't be here," thought Nicholas "I'll lay it on his table."

So Nicholas opened the door and walked in; and very quickly turned to walk out again, when he saw to his great astonishment and discomfiture a young lady upon her knees at Mr. Cheeryble's feet, and Mr. Cheeryble beseeching her to rise, and entreating a third person, who had the appearance of the young lady's female attendant, to add her persuasions to his to induce her to do so.

Nicholas stammered out an awkward apology, and was precipitately retiring, when the young lady, turning her head a little, presented to his view the features of the lovely girl whom he had seen at the register-office on his first visit long before. Glancing from her to the attendant, he recognised the same clumsy servant who had accompanied her then; and between his admiration of the young lady's beauty, and the confusion and surprise of this unexpected recognition, he stood stock-still, in such a bewildered state of surprise and embarrassment that for the moment he was quite bereft of the power either to speak or move.

"My dear ma'am—my dear young lady," cried brother Charles in violent agitation, "pray don't—not another word, I beseech and entreat you. I implore you—I beg of you—to rise. We—we—are not alone."

As he spoke he raised the young lady, who staggered to a chair and swooned away.

"She has fainted, Sir," said Nicholas, darting eagerly forward.

"Poor dear, poor dear!" cried brother Charles. "Where is my brother Ned? Ned, my dear brother, come here, pray."

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow," replied his brother, hurrying into the room, "what is the——ah! what——"

"Hush! hush!—not a word for your life, brother Ned," returned the other. "Ring for the housekeeper, my dear brother—call Tim Linkinwater. Here, Tim Linkinwater, Sir—Mr. Nickleby, my dear Sir, leave the room, I beg and beseech of you."

"I think she is better now," said Nicholas, who had been

watching the patient so eagerly that he had not heard the request.

"Poor bird!" cried brother Charles, gently taking her hand in his, and laying her head upon his arm. "Brother Ned, my dear fellow, you will be surprised, I know, to witness this in business hours; but—" here he was again reminded of the presence of Nicholas, and shaking him by the hand, earnestly requested him to leave the room, and to send Tim Linkinwater without an instant's delay.

Nicholas immediately withdrew, and on his way to the counting-house met both the old housekeeper and Tim Linkinwater, jostling each other in the passage, and hurrying to the scene of action with extraordinary speed. Without waiting to hear his message, Tim Linkinwater darted into the room, and presently afterwards Nicholas heard the door shut and locked on the inside.

He had abundance of time to ruminate on this discovery, for Tim Linkinwater was absent during the greater part of an hour, during the whole of which time Nicholas thought of nothing but the young lady and her exceeding beauty, and what could possibly have brought her there, and why they made such a mystery of it. The more he thought of all this, the more it perplexed him, and the more anxious he became to know who and what she was. "I should have known her among ten thousand," thought Nicholas. And with that he walked up and down the room, and recalling her face and figure (of which he had a peculiarly vivid remembrance), discarded all other subjects of reflection and dwelt upon that alone.

At length Tim Linkinwater came back—provokingly cool, and with papers in his hand, and a pen in his mouth, as if nothing had happened.

"Is she quite recovered?" said Nicholas, impetuously.

"Who?" returned Tim Linkinwater.

"Who!" repeated Nicholas. "The young lady."

"What do you make, Mr. Nickleby," said Tim, taking his pen out of his mouth, "what do you make of four hundred and twenty-seven times three thousand two hundred and thirty-eight?"

"Nay," returned Nicholas, "what do you make of my question first? I asked you——"

"About the young lady," said Tim Linkinwater, putting on his spectacles. "To be sure. Yes. Oh! she's very well."

"Very well, is she?" returned Nicholas.

"*Very* well," replied Mr. Linkinwater, gravely.

"Will she be able to go home to-day?" asked Nicholas.

"She's gone," said Tim.

"Gone!"

"Yes."

"I hope she has not far to go?" said Nicholas, looking earnestly at the other.

"Ay," replied the immovable Tim, "I hope she hasn't."

Nicholas hazarded one or two further remarks, but it was evident that Tim Linkinwater had his own reasons for evading the subject, and that he was determined to afford no further information respecting the fair unknown, who had awakened so much curiosity in the breast of his young friend. Nothing daunted by this repulse, Nicholas returned to the charge next day, emboldened by the circumstances of Mr. Linkinwater being in a very talkative and communicative mood; but directly he resumed the theme, Tim relapsed into a state of most provoking taciturnity, and from answering in monosyllables, came to returning no answers at all, save such as were to be inferred from several grave nods and shrugs, which only served to whet that appetite for intelligence in Nicholas, which had already attained a most unreasonable height.

Foiled in these attempts, he was fain to content himself with watching for the young lady's next visit, but here again he was disappointed. Day after day passed, and she did not return. He looked eagerly at the superscription of all the notes and letters, but there was not one among them which he could fancy to be in her handwriting. On two or three occasions he was employed on business which took him to a distance, and had formerly been transacted by Tim Linkinwater. Nicholas could not help suspecting that for some reason or other he was sent out of the way on purpose, and that the young lady was there in his absence. Nothing transpired, however, to confirm this suspicion, and Tim could not be entrapped into any confession or admission tending to support it in the smallest degree.

Mystery and disappointment are not absolutely indispensable to the growth of love, but they are very often its powerful auxiliaries. "Out of sight, out of mind," is well enough as a proverb applicable to cases of friendship,

though absence is not always necessary to hollowness of heart even between friends, and truth and honesty, like precious stones, are perhaps most easily imitated at a distance, when the counterfeits often pass for real. Love, however, is very materially assisted by a warm and active imagination, which has a long memory, and will thrive for a considerable time on very slight and sparing food. Thus it is that it often attains its most luxuriant growth in separation and under circumstances of the utmost difficulty; and thus it was that Nicholas, thinking of nothing but the unknown young lady from day to day and from hour to hour, began at last to think that he was very desperately in love with her, and that never was such an ill-used and persecuted lover as he.

Still, though he loved and languished after the most orthodox models, and was only deterred from making a confidante of Kate by the slight considerations of having never, in all his life, spoken to the subject of his passion, and having never set eyes upon her except on two occasions, on both of which she had come and gone like a flash of lightning—or, as Nicholas himself said, in the numerous conversations he held with himself, like a vision of youth and beauty much too bright to last—his ardour and devotion remained without its reward. The young lady appeared no more; so that there was a great deal of love wasted (enough indeed to have set up half-a-dozen young gentlemen, as times go, with the utmost decency) and nobody was a bit the wiser for it; not even Nicholas himself, who, on the contrary, became more dull, sentimental, and lackadaisical every day.

While matters were in this state, the failure of a correspondent of the Brothers Cheeryble, in Germany, imposed upon Tim Linkinwater and Nicholas the necessity of going through some very long and complicated accounts extending over a considerable space of time. To get through them with the greater despatch, Tim Linkinwater proposed that they should remain at the counting-house for a week or so, until ten o'clock at night; to this, as nothing damped the zeal of Nicholas in the service of his kind patrons—not even romance, which has seldom business habits—he cheerfully assented. On the very first night of these later hours, at nine exactly, there came: not the young lady herself, but her servant, who being closeted with brother

Charles for some time, went away, and returned the next night at the same hour, and on the next, and on the next again.

These repeated visits inflamed the curiosity of Nicholas to the very highest pitch. Tantalized and excited beyond all bearing, and unable to fathom the mystery without neglecting his duty, he confided the whole secret to Newman Noggs, imploring him to be on the watch next night, to follow the girl home, to set on foot such inquiries relative to the name, condition, and history of her mistress, as he could without exciting suspicion; and to report the result to him with the least possible delay.

Beyond all measure proud of this commission, Newman Noggs took up his post in the square on the following evening, a full hour before the needful time, and planting himself behind the pump and pulling his hat over his eyes, began his watch with an elaborate appearance of mystery admirably calculated to excite the suspicion of all beholders. Indeed, divers servant-girls who came to draw water, and sundry little boys who stopped to drink at the ladle, were almost scared out of their senses by the apparition of Newman Noggs looking stealthily round the pump, with nothing of him visible but his face, and that wearing the expression of a meditative ogre.

Punctual to her time, the messenger came again, and, after an interview of rather longer duration than usual, departed. Newman had made two appointments with Nicholas, one for the next evening conditional on his success, and one the next night following, which was to be kept under all circumstances. The first night he was not at the place of meeting (a certain tavern about half-way between the City and Golden Square), but on the second night he was there before Nicholas, and received him with open arms.

"It's all right," whispered Newman. "Sit down—sit down, there's a dear young man, and let me tell you all about it."

Nicholas needed no second invitation, and eagerly inquired what was the news.

"There's a great deal of news," said Newman, in a flutter of exultation. "It's all right. Don't be anxious. I don't know where to begin. Never mind that. Keep up your spirits. It's all right."

"Well?" said Nicholas eagerly. "Yes?"

"Yes," replied Newman. "That's it."

"What's it?" said Nicholas. "The name—the name, my dear fellow."

"The name's Bobster," replied Newman.

"Bobster!" repeated Nicholas, indignantly.

"That's the name," said Newman. "I remembered it by Lobster."

"Bobster!" repeated Nicholas, more emphatically than before. "That must be the servant's name."

"No, it an't," said Newman, shaking his head with great positiveness. "Miss Cecilia Bobster."

"Cecilia, eh?" returned Nicholas, muttering the two names together over and over again in every variety of tone, to try the effect. "Well, Cecilia is a pretty name."

"Very. And a pretty creature too," said Newman.

"Who?" said Nicholas.

"Miss Bobster."

"Why, where have you seen her?" demanded Nicholas.

"Never mind, my dear boy," retorted Noggs, clapping him on the shoulder. "I *have* seen her. You shall see her. I have managed it all."

"My dear Newman," cried Nicholas, grasping his hand, "are you serious?"

"I am," replied Newman. "I mean it all. Every word. You shall see her to-morrow night. She consents to hear you speak for yourself. I persuaded her. She is all affability, goodness, sweetness, and beauty."

"I know she is; I know she must be, Newman," said Nicholas, wringing his hand.

"You are right," returned Newman.

"Where does she live?" cried Nicholas. "What have you learnt of her history? Has she a father—mother—any brothers—sisters? What did she say? How came you to see her? Was she not very much surprised? Did you say how passionately I have longed to speak to her? Did you tell her where I had seen her? Did you tell her how, and when, and where, and how long, and how often, I have thought of that sweet face which came upon me in my bitterest distress like a glimpse of some better world—did you, Newman—did you?"

Poor Noggs literally gasped for breath as this flood of questions rushed upon him, and moved spasmodically in his chair at every fresh inquiry, staring at Nicholas meanwhile with the most ludicrous expression of perplexity.

"No," said Newman, "I didn't tell her that."

"Didn't tell her which?" asked Nicholas.

"About the glimpse of the better world," said Newman. "I didn't tell her who you were, either, or where you'd seen her. I said you loved her to distraction."

"That's true, Newman," replied Nicholas, with his characteristic vehemence. "Heaven knows I do!"

"I said too, that you had admired her for a long time in secret," said Newman.

"Yes, yes. What did she say to that?" asked Nicholas.

"Blushed," said Newman.

"To be sure. Of course she would," said Nicholas, approvingly.

Newman then went on to say that the young lady was an only child, and that her mother was dead, and that she resided with her father; and that she had been induced to allow her lover a secret interview at the intercession of her servant, who had great influence with her. He further related how it had required much moving and great eloquence to bring the young lady to this pass; how it was expressly understood that she merely afforded Nicholas an opportunity of declaring his passion, and how she by no means pledged herself to be favourably impressed with his intentions. The mystery of her visits to the Brothers Cheeryble remained wholly unexplained, for Newman had not alluded to them, either in his preliminary conversations with the servant or his subsequent interview with the mistress, merely remarking that he had been instructed to watch the girl home and plead his young friend's cause, and not saying how far he had followed her, or from what point. But Newman hinted that from what had fallen from the confidante, he had been led to suspect that the young lady led a very miserable and unhappy life, under the strict control of her only parent, who was of a violent and brutal temper —a circumstance which he thought might in some degree account, both for her having sought the protection and friendship of the brothers, and her suffering herself to be prevailed upon to grant the promised interview. The last he held to be a very logical deduction from the premises, inasmuch as it was but natural to suppose that a young lady, whose present condition was so unenviable, would be more than commonly desirous to change it.

It appeared on further questioning—for it was only by a

very long and arduous process that all this could be got out of Newman Noggs—that Newman, in explanation of his shabby appearance, had represented himself as being, for certain wise and indispensable purposes connected with that intrigue, in disguise; and being questioned how he had come to exceed his commission so far as to procure an interview, he responded, that the lady appearing willing to grant it, he considered himself bound, both in duty and gallantry, to avail himself of such a golden means of enabling Nicholas to prosecute his addresses. After these and all possible questions had been asked and answered twenty times over, they parted, undertaking to meet on the following night at half-past ten, for the purpose of fulfilling the appointment, which was for eleven o'clock.

"Things come about very strangely," thought Nicholas, as he walked home. "I never contemplated anything of this kind; never dreamt of the possibility of it. To know something of the life of one in whom I felt such interest; to see her in the street, to pass the house in which she lived, to meet her sometimes in her walks, to hope that a day might come when I might be in a condition to tell her of my love; this was the utmost extent of my thoughts. Now, however—but I should be a fool, indeed, to repine at my own good fortune."

Still Nicholas was dissatisfied; and there was more in the dissatisfaction than mere revulsion of feeling. He was angry with the young lady for being so easily won, "because," reasoned Nicholas, "it is not as if she knew it was I, but it might have been anybody,"—which was certainly not pleasant. The next moment he was angry with himself for entertaining such thoughts, arguing that nothing but goodness could dwell in such a temple, and that the behaviour of the brothers sufficiently showed the estimation in which they held her. "The fact is, she's a mystery altogether," said Nicholas. This was not more satisfactory than his previous course of reflection, and only drove him out upon a new sea of speculation and conjecture, where he tossed and tumbled in great discomfort of mind until the clock struck ten, and the hour of meeting drew nigh.

Nicholas had dressed himself with great care, and even Newman Noggs had trimmed himself up a little: his coat presenting the phenomenon of two consecutive buttons, and the supplementary pins being inserted at tolerably regular

intervals. He wore his hat, too, in the newest taste, with a pocket handkerchief in the crown, and a twisted end of it straggling out behind after the fashion of a pigtail, though he could scarcely lay claim to the ingenuity of inventing this latter decoration, inasmuch as he was utterly unconscious of it: being in a nervous and excited condition which rendered him quite insensible to everything but the great object of the expedition.

They traversed the streets in profound silence; and after walking at a round pace for some distance, arrived in one of a gloomy appearance and very little frequented, near the Edgeware-road.

"Number twelve," said Newman.

"Oh!" replied Nicholas, looking about him.

"Good street?" said Newman.

"Yes," returned Nicholas, "rather dull."

Newman made no answer to this remark, but, halting abruptly, planted Nicholas with his back to some area railings, and gave him to understand that he was to wait there, without moving hand or foot, until it was satisfactorily ascertained that the coast was clear. This done, Noggs limped away with great alacrity, looking over his shoulder every instant, to make quite certain that Nicholas was obeying his directions; and ascending the steps of a house some half-dozen doors off, was lost to view.

After a short delay, he re-appeared, and limping back again, halted midway, and beckoned Nicholas to follow him.

"Well!" said Nicholas, advancing towards him on tiptoe.

"All right," replied Newman, in high glee. "All ready; nobody at home. Couldn't be better. Ha! ha!"

With this fortifying assurance, he stole past a street-door, on which Nicholas caught a glimpse of a brass plate, with "Bobster," in very large letters; and stopping at the area-gate, which was open, signed to his young friend to descend.

"What the devil!" cried Nicholas, drawing back. "Are we to sneak into the kitchen as if we came after the forks?"

"Hush!" replied Newman. "Old Bobster—ferocious Turk. He'd kill 'em all—box the young lady's ears—he does—often."

"What!" cried Nicholas, in high wrath, "do you mean to tell me that any man would dare to box the ears of such a——"

He had no time to sing the praises of his mistress just then, for Newman gave him a gentle push which had nearly precipitated him to the bottom of the area steps. Thinking it best to take the hint in good part, Nicholas descended without further remonstrance, but with a countenance bespeaking anything rather than the hope and rapture of a passionate lover. Newman followed—he would have followed head first, but for the timely assistance of Nicholas—and, taking his hand, led him through a stone passage, profoundly dark, into a back kitchen or cellar of the blackest and most pitchy obscurity, where they stopped.

"Well!" said Nicholas, in a discontented whisper, "this is not all, I suppose, is it?"

"No, no," rejoined Noggs; "they'll be here directly. It's all right."

"I am glad to hear it," said Nicholas. "I shouldn't have thought it, I confess."

They exchanged no further words, and there Nicholas stood, listening to the loud breathing of Newman Noggs, and imagining that his nose seemed to glow like a red hot coal, even in the midst of the darkness which enshrouded them. Suddenly the sound of cautious footsteps attracted his ear, and directly afterwards a female voice inquired if the gentleman were there.

"Yes," replied Nicholas, turning towards the corner from which the voice proceeded. "Who is that?"

"Only me, Sir," replied the voice. "Now if you please, ma'am."

A gleam of light shone into the place, and presently the servant-girl appeared, bearing a light, and followed by her young mistress, who seemed to be overwhelmed by modesty and confusion.

At sight of the young lady, Nicholas started and changed colour; his heart beat violently, and he stood rooted to the spot. At that instant, and almost simultaneously with her arrival and that of the candle, there was heard a loud and furious knocking at the street-door, which caused Newman Noggs to jump up with great agility from a beer-barrel, on which he had been seated astride, and to exclaim abruptly, and with a face of ashy paleness, "Bobster, by the Lord!"

The young lady shrieked, the attendant wrung her hands, Nicholas gazed from one to the other in apparent stupefaction, and Newman hurried to and fro, thrusting his hands

into all his pockets successively, and drawing out the linings of every one in the excess of his irresolution. It was but a moment, but the confusion crowded into that one moment no imagination can exaggerate.

"Leave the house, for Heaven's sake! We have done wrong—we deserve it all," cried the young lady. "Leave the house, or I am ruined and undone forever."

"Will you hear me say but one word?" cried Nicholas. "Only one. I will not detain you. Will you hear me say one word in explanation of this mischance?"

But Nicholas might as well have spoken to the wind, for the young lady with distracted looks hurried up the stairs. He would have followed her, but Newman, twisting his hand in his coat collar, dragged him towards the passage by which they had entered.

"Let me go, Newman, in the Devil's name," cried Nicholas. "I must speak to her—I will; I will not leave this house without."

"Reputation—character—violence—consider," said Newman, clinging round him with both arms, and hurrying him away. "Let them open the door. We'll go as we came directly it's shut. Come. This way. Here."

Overpowered by the remonstrances of Newman and the tears and prayers of the girl, and the tremendous knocking above, which had never ceased, Nicholas allowed himself to be hurried off; and precisely as Mr. Bobster made his entrance by the street-door, he and Noggs made their exit by the area-gate.

They hurried away through several streets without stopping or speaking. At last they halted and confronted each other with blank and rueful faces.

"Never mind," said Newman, gasping for breath. "Don't be cast down. It's all right. More fortunate next time. It couldn't be helped. I did *my* part."

"Excellently," replied Nicholas, taking his hand. "Excellently, and like the true and zealous friend you are. Only—mind, I am not disappointed, Newman, and feel just as much indebted to you—only *it was the wrong lady.*"

"Eh?" cried Newman Noggs. "Taken in by the servant?"

"Newman, Newman," said Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder: "it was the wrong servant too."

Newman's under-jaw dropped, and he gazed at Nicholas with his sound eye fixed fast and motionless in his head.

"Don't take it to heart," said Nicholas; "it's of no consequence; you see I don't care about it; you followed the wrong person, that's all."

That *was* all. Whether Newman Noggs had looked round the pump in a slanting direction so long, that his sight became impaired; or whether, finding that there was time to spare, he had recruited himself with a few drops of something stronger than the pump could yield—by whatsoever means it had come to pass, this was his mistake. And Nicholas went home to brood upon it, and to meditate upon the charms of the unknown young lady, now as far beyond his reach as ever.

CHAPTER XLI.

CONTAINING SOME ROMANTIC PASSAGES BETWEEN MRS. NICKLEBY AND THE GENTLEMAN IN THE SMALL-CLOTHES NEXT DOOR.

Ever since her last momentous conversation with her son, Mrs. Nickleby had by little and little begun to display unusual care in the adornment of her person, gradually superadding to those staid and matronly habiliments, which had up to that time formed her ordinary attire, a variety of embellishments and decorations, slight perhaps in themselves, but, taken together, and considered with reference to the subject of her disclosure, of no mean importance. Even her black dress assumed something of a deadly-lively air from the jaunty style in which it was worn; and, eked out as its lingering attractions were, by a prudent disposal here and there of certain juvenile ornaments of little or no value, which had for that reason alone escaped the general wreck and been permitted to slumber peacefully in odd corners of old drawers and boxes where daylight seldom shone, her mourning garments assumed quite a new character, and from being the outward tokens of respect and sorrow for the dead, were converted into signals of very slaughterous and killing designs upon the living.

Mrs. Nickleby might have been stimulated to this pro-

ceeding by a lofty sense of duty, and impulses of unquestionable excellence. She might by this time have become impressed with the sinfulness of long indulgence in unavailing woe, or the necessity of setting a proper example of neatness and decorum to her blooming daughter. Considerations of duty and responsibility apart, the change might have taken its rise in feelings of the purest and most disinterested charity. The gentleman next door had been vilified by Nicholas; rudely stigmatised as a dotard and an idiot; and for these attacks upon his understanding, Mrs. Nickleby was in some sort accountable. She might have felt that it was the act of a good Christian to show, by all means in her power, that the abused gentleman was neither the one nor the other. And what better means could she adopt towards so virtuous and laudable an end, than proving to all men, in her own person, that his passion was the most rational and reasonable in the world, and just the very result of all others which discreet and thinking persons might have foreseen, from her incautiously displaying her matured charms, without reserve, under the very eye, as it were, of an ardent and too-susceptible man?

"Ah!" said Mrs. Nickleby, gravely shaking her head; "if Nicholas knew what his poor dear papa suffered before we were engaged, when I used to hate him, he would have a little more feeling. Shall I ever forget the morning I looked scornfully at him when he offered to carry my parasol? Or that night when I frowned at him? It was a mercy he didn't emigrate. It very nearly drove him to it."

Whether the deceased might not have been better off if he had emigrated in his bachelor days, was a question which his relict did not stop to consider, for Kate entered the room with her work-box in this stage of her reflections; and a much slighter interruption, or no interruption at all, would have diverted Mrs. Nickleby's thoughts into a new channel at any time.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby; "I don't know how it is, but a fine warm summer day like this, with the birds singing in every direction, always puts me in mind of roast pig, with sage and onion sauce and made gravy."

"That's a curious association of ideas, is it not, mama?"

"Upon my word, my dear, I don't know," replied Mrs. Nickleby. "Roast pig—let me see. On the day five

weeks after you were christened, we had a roast—no, that couldn't have been a pig, either, because I recollect there were a pair of them to carve, and your poor papa and I could never have thought of sitting down to two pigs—they must have been partridges. Roast pig! I hardly think we ever could have had one, now I come to remember, for your papa could never bear the sight of them in the shops, and used to say that they always put him in mind of very little babies, only the pigs had much fairer complexions; and he had a horror of little babies, too, because he couldn't very well afford any increase to his family, and had a natural dislike to the subject. It's very odd now, what can put that in my head! I recollect dining once at Mrs. Bevan's, in that broad street, round the corner by the coachmaker's, where the tipsy man fell through the cellar-flap of an empty house nearly a week before quarter-day, and wasn't found till the new tenant went in—and we had roast pig there. It must be that, I think, that reminds me of it, especially as there was a little bird in the room that would keep on singing all the time of dinner—at least, not a little bird, for it was a parrot, and he didn't sing exactly, for he talked and swore dreadfully; but I think it must be that. Indeed I am sure it must. Shouldn't you say so, my dear?"

"I should say there was not a doubt about it, mama," returned Kate, with a cheerful smile.

"No; but *do* you think so, Kate?" said Mrs. Nickleby, with as much gravity as if it were a question of the most imminent and thrilling interest. "If you don't, say so at once, you know; because it's just as well to be correct, particularly on a point of this kind, which is very curious and worth settling while one thinks about it."

Kate laughingly replied that she was quite convinced; and as her mama still appeared undetermined whether it was not absolutely essential that the subject should be renewed, proposed that they should take their work into the summer-house and enjoy the beauty of the afternoon. Mrs. Nickleby readily assented, and to the summer-house they repaired without further discussion.

"Well, I will say," observed Mrs. Nickleby, as she took her seat, "that there never was such a good creature as Smike. Upon my word, the pains he has taken in putting this little arbour to rights and training the sweetest

flowers about it, are beyond anything I could have——I wish he wouldn't put *all* the gravel on your side, Kate, my dear, though, and leave nothing but mould for me."

"Dear mama," returned Kate, hastily, "take this seat—do—to oblige me, mama."

"No, indeed, my dear. I shall keep my own side," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Well! I declare!"

Kate looked up inquiringly.

"If he hasn't been," said Mrs. Nickleby, "and got, from somewhere or other, a couple of roots of those flowers that I said I was so fond of, the other night, and asked you if you were not—no, that *you* said *you* were so fond of, the other night, and asked me if I wasn't—it's the same thing. Now, upon my word, I take that as very kind and attentive indeed! I don't see," added Mrs. Nickleby, looking narrowly about her, "any of them on my side, but I suppose they grow best near the gravel. You may depend upon it they do, Kate, and that's the reason they are all near you, and he has put the gravel there because it's the sunny side. Upon my word, that's very clever now. I shouldn't have had half as much thought myself!"

"Mama," said Kate hurriedly, bending over her work so that her face was almost hidden, "before you were married——"

"Dear me, Kate," interrupted Mrs. Nickleby, "what in the name of goodness graciousness makes you fly off to the time before I was married, when I'm talking to you about his thoughtfulness and attention to me? You don't seem to take the smallest interest in the garden."

"Oh! mama," said Kate, raising her face again, "you know I do."

"Well then, my dear, why don't you praise the neatness and prettiness with which it's kept?" said Mrs. Nickleby. "How very odd you are, Kate!"

"I do praise it, mama," answered Kate, gently. "Poor fellow!"

"I scarcely ever hear you, my dear," retorted Mrs. Nickleby; "that's all I've got to say." By this time the good lady had been a long while upon one topic, so she fell at once into her daughter's little trap for changing it—if trap it were—and inquired what she had been going to say.

"About what, mama?" said Kate, who had apparently quite forgotten her diversion.

"Lor, Kate, my dear," returned her mother, "why, you're asleep or stupid! About the time before I was married."

"Oh yes!" said Kate, "I remember. I was going to ask, mama, before you were married, had you many suitors?"

"Suitors, my dear!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with a smile of wonderful complacency. "First and last, Kate, I must have had a dozen at least."

"Mama!" returned Kate, in a tone of remonstrance.

"I had indeed, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby; "not including your poor papa, or a young gentleman who used to go at that time to the same dancing-school, and who *would* send gold watches and bracelets to our house in gilt-edged paper (which were always returned), and who afterwards unfortunately went out to Botany Bay in a cadet ship—a convict ship I mean—and escaped into a bush and killed sheep (I don't know how they got there), and was going to be hung, only he accidentally choked himself, and the Government pardoned him. Then there was young Lukin," said Mrs. Nickleby, beginning with her left thumb and checking off the names on her fingers—"Mogley—Tipslark—Cabbery—Smifser——"

Having now reached her little finger, Mrs. Nickleby was carrying the account over to the other hand, when a loud "Hem!" which appeared to come from the very foundation of the garden-wall, gave both herself and her daughter a violent start.

"Mama! what was that?" said Kate, in a low tone of voice.

"Upon my word, my dear," returned Mrs. Nickleby, considerably startled, "unless it was the gentleman belonging to the next house, I don't know what it could possibly——"

"A—hem!" cried the same voice; and that, not in the tone of an ordinary clearing of the throat, but in a kind of bellow, which woke up all the echoes in the neighbourhood, and was prolonged to an extent which must have made the unseen bellower quite black in the face.

"I understand it now, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, laying her hand on Kate's; "don't be alarmed, my love, it's

not directed to you, and is not intended to frighten anybody. Let us give everybody their due, Kate; I am bound to say that."

So saying, Mrs. Nickleby nodded her head, and patted the back of her daughter's hand a great many times, and looked as if she could tell something vastly important if she chose, but had self-denial, thank God! and wouldn't do it.

"What do you mean, mama?" demanded Kate, in evident surprise.

"Don't be flurried, my dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby, looking towards the garden-wall, "for you see I'm not, and if it would be excusable in anybody to be flurried, it certainly would—under all the circumstances—be excusable in me, but I am not, Kate—not at all."

"It seems designed to attract our attention, mama," said Kate.

"It *is* designed to attract our attention, my dear—at least," rejoined Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up, and patting her daughter's hand more blandly than before, "to attract the attention of one of us. Hem! you needn't be at all uneasy, my dear."

Kate looked very much perplexed, and was apparently about to ask for further explanation, when a shouting and scuffling noise, as of an elderly gentleman whooping, and kicking up his legs on loose gravel with great violence, was heard to proceed from the same direction as the former sounds; and, before they had subsided, a large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a sky-rocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over, until it fell at Mrs. Nickleby's feet.

This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft, and come toppling down; then, several cucumbers shot up together; and, finally, the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnip-radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering and bumping about in all directions.

As Kate rose from her seat in some alarm, and caught her mother's hand to run with her into the house, she felt herself rather retarded than assisted in her intention; and following the direction of Mrs. Nickleby's eyes, was quite terrified by the apparition of an old black velvet cap,

which, by slow degrees, as if its wearer were ascending a ladder or pair of steps, rose above the wall dividing their garden from that of the next cottage (which, like their own, was a detached building), and was gradually followed by a very large head, and an old face, in which were a pair of most extraordinary grey eyes, very wild, very wide open, and rolling in their sockets with a dull, languishing and leering look, most ugly to behold.

"Mama!" cried Kate, really terrified for the moment, "why do you stop, why do you lose an instant?—Mama, pray come in!"

"Kate, my dear," returned her mother, still holding back, "how can you be so foolish? I'm ashamed of you. How do you suppose you are ever to get through life, if you're such a coward as this! What do you want, Sir?" said Mrs. Nickleby, addressing the intruder with a sort of simpering displeasure. "How dare you look into this garden?"

"Queen of my soul," replied the stranger, folding his hands together, "this goblet sip!"

"Nonsense, Sir," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Kate, my love, pray be quiet."

"Won't you sip the goblet?" urged the stranger, with his head imploringly on one side, and his right hand on his breast. "Oh, do sip the goblet!"

"I shall not consent to do anything of the kind, Sir," said Mrs. Nickleby, with a haughty air. "Pray, begone."

"Why is it," said the old gentleman, coming up a step higher, and leaning his elbows on the wall, with as much complacency as if he were looking out of window, "why is it that beauty is always obdurate, even when admiration is as honourable and respectful as mine?" Here he smiled, kissed his hand, and made several low bows. "Is it owing to the bees, who, when the honey season is over, and they are supposed to have been killed with brimstone, in reality fly to Barbary and lull the captive Moors to sleep with their drowsy songs? Or is it," he added, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, "in consequence of the statue at Charing Cross having been lately seen on the Stock Exchange at midnight, walking arm-in-arm with the Pump from Aldgate, in a riding-habit?"

"Mama," murmured Kate, "do you hear him?"

"Hush, my dear!" replied Mrs. Nickleby, in the same

tone of voice, "he is very polite, and I think that was a quotation from the poets. Pray, don't worry me so—you'll pinch my arm black and blue. Go away, Sir!"

"Quite away?" said the gentleman, with a languishing look, "Oh! quite away?"

"Yes," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "certainly. You have no business here. This is private property, Sir; you ought to know that."

"I do know," said the old gentleman, laying his finger on his nose with an air of familiarity most reprehensible, "that this is a sacred and enchanted spot, where the most divine charms"—here he kissed his hand and bowed again—"waft mellifluousness over the neighbours' gardens, and force the fruit and vegetables into premature existence. That fact I am acquainted with. But will you permit me, fairest creature, to ask you one question, in the absence of the planet Venus, who has gone on business to the Horse Guards, and would otherwise—jealous of your superior charms—interpose between us?"

"Kate," observed Mrs. Nickleby, turning to her daughter, "it's very awkward, positively. I really don't know what to say to this gentleman. One ought to be civil, you know."

"Dear mama," rejoined Kate, "don't say a word to him, but let us run away as fast as we can, and shut ourselves up till Nicholas comes home."

Mrs. Nickleby looked very grand, not to say contemptuous, at this humiliating proposal; and, turning to the old gentleman, who had watched them during these whispers with absorbing eagerness, said—

"If you will conduct yourself, Sir, like the gentleman which I should imagine you to be from your language and —and—appearance (quite the counterpart of your grandpapa, Kate, my dear, in his best days), and will put your question to me in plain words, I will answer it."

If Mrs. Nickleby's excellent papa had borne, in his best days, a resemblance to the neighbour now looking over the wall, he must have been, to say the least, a very queer-looking old gentleman in his prime. Perhaps Kate thought so, for she ventured to glance at his living portrait with some attention, as he took off his black velvet cap, and, exhibiting a perfectly bald head, made a long series of bows, each accompanied with a fresh kiss of the hand.

After exhausting himself, to all appearance, with this fatiguing performance, he covered his head once more, pulled the cap very carefully over the tips of his ears, and resuming his former attitude, said,

"The question is—"

Here he broke off to look round in every direction, and satisfy himself beyond all doubt that there were no listeners near. Assured that there were not, he tapped his nose several times, accompanying the action with a cunning look, as though congratulating himself on his caution; and, stretching out his neck, said in a loud whisper,

"Are you a princess?"

"You are mocking me, Sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby, making a feint of retreating towards the house.

"No, but are you?" said the old gentleman.

"You know I am not, Sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby.

"Then are you any relation to the Archbishop of Canterbury?" inquired the old gentleman with great anxiety, "or to the Pope of Rome? Or the Speaker of the House of Commons? Forgive me, if I am wrong, but I was told you were niece to the Commissioners of Paving, and daughter-in-law to the Lord Mayor and Court of Common Council, which would account for your relationship to all three."

"Whoever has spread such reports, Sir," returned Mrs. Nickleby, with some warmth, "has taken great liberties with my name, and one which I am sure my son Nicholas, if he was aware of it, would not allow for an instant. The idea!" said Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up. "Niece to the Commissioners of Paving!"

"Pray, mama come away!" whispered Kate.

"'Pray, mama!' Nonsense, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby, angrily, "but that's just the way. If they had said I was niece to a piping bullfinch, what would you care! But I have no sympathy—" whimpered Mrs. Nickleby, "I don't expect it, that's one thing."

"Tears!" cried the old gentleman, with such an energetic jump, that he fell down two or three steps, and grated his chin against the wall. "Catch the crystal globules—catch 'em—bottle 'em up—cork 'em tight—put sealing-wax on the top—seal 'em with a Cupid—label 'em 'Best quality'—and stow 'em away in the fourteen binn, with a bar of iron on the top to keep the thunder off!"

Issuing these commands, as if there were a dozen at-

tendants all actively engaged in their execution, he turned his velvet cap inside out, put it on with great dignity so as to obscure his right eye and three-fourths of his nose, and sticking his arms a-kimbo, looked very fiercely at a sparrow hard by, till the bird flew away, when he then put his cap in his pocket with an air of great satisfaction, and addressed himself with respectful demeanour to Mrs. Nickleby.

"Beautiful madam," such were his words, "if I have made any mistake with regard to your family or connexions, I humbly beseech you to pardon me. If I supposed you to be related to Foreign Powers or Native Boards, it is because you have a manner, a carriage, a dignity, which you will excuse my saying that none but yourself (with the single exception perhaps of the tragic muse, when playing extemporaneously on the barrel organ before the East India Company) can parallel. I am not a youth, ma'am, as you see; and although beings like you can never grow old, I venture to presume that we are fitted for each other."

"Really, Kate, my love!" said Mrs. Nickleby faintly, and looking another way.

"I have estates, ma'am," said the old gentleman, flourishing his right hand negligently, as if he made very light of such matters, and speaking very fast; "jewels, lighthouses, fish-ponds, a whalery of my own in the North Sea, and several oyster-beds of great profit in the Pacific Ocean. If you will have the kindness to step down to the Royal Exchange and to take the cocked hat off the stoutest beadle's head, you will find my card in the lining of the crown, wrapped up in a piece of blue paper. My walking-stick is also to be seen on application to the chaplain of the House of Commons, who is strictly forbidden to take any money for showing it. I have enemies about me, ma'am," he looked towards his house and spoke very low, "who attack me on all occasions, and wish to secure my property. If you bless me with your hand and heart, you can apply to the Lord Chancellor or call out the military if necessary—sending my toothpick to the Commander-in-Chief will be sufficient—and so clear the house of them before the ceremony is performed. After that, love bliss and rapture; rapture love and bliss. Be mine, be mine!"

Repeating these last words with great rapture and enthusiasm, the old gentleman put on his black velvet cap

again, and looking up into the sky in a hasty manner, said something that was not quite intelligible concerning a balloon he expected, and which was rather after its time.

"Be mine, be mine!" repeated the old gentleman.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I have hardly the power to speak; but it is necessary for the happiness of all parties that this matter should be set at rest for ever."

"Surely there is no necessity for you to say one word, mama?" reasoned Kate.

"You will allow me, my dear, if you please, to judge for myself," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"Be mine, be mine!" cried the old gentleman.

"It can scarcely be expected, Sir," said Mrs. Nickleby, fixing her eyes modestly on the ground, "that I should tell a stranger whether I feel flattered and obliged by such proposals, or not. They certainly are made under very singular circumstances; still at the same time, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent of course" (Mrs. Nickleby's customary qualification), "they must be gratifying and agreeable to one's feelings."

"Be mine, be mine," cried the old gentleman. "Gog and Magog, Gog and Magog. Be mine, be mine!"

"It will be sufficient for me to say, Sir," resumed Mrs. Nickleby, with perfect seriousness—"and I'm sure you'll see the propriety of taking an answer and going away—that I have made up my mind to remain a widow, and to devote myself to my children. You may not suppose I am the mother of two children—indeed many people have doubted it, and said that nothing on earth could ever make 'em believe it possible—but it is the case, and they are both grown up. We shall be very glad to have you for a neighbour—very glad; delighted, I'm sure—but in any other character it's quite impossible, quite. As to my being young enough to marry again, that perhaps may be so, or it may not be; but I couldn't think of it for an instant, not on any account whatever. I said I never would, and I never will. It's a very painful thing to have to reject proposals, and I would much rather that none were made; at the same time this is the answer that I determined long ago to make, and this is the answer I shall always give."

These observations were partly addressed to the old gen-

tleman, partly to Kate, and partly delivered in soliloquy. Towards their conclusion, the suitor evinced a very irreverent degree of inattention, and Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely finished speaking, when, to the great terror both of that lady and her daughter, he suddenly flung off his coat, and springing on the top of the wall, threw himself into an attitude which displayed his small clothes and grey worsteds to the fullest advantage, and concluded by standing on one leg, and repeating his favourite bellow with increased vehemence.

While he was still dwelling on the last note, and embellishing it with a prolonged flourish, a dirty hand was observed to glide stealthily and swiftly along the top of the wall, as if in pursuit of a fly, and then to clasp with the utmost dexterity one of the old gentleman's ankles. This done, the companion hand appeared, and clasped the other ankle.

Thus encumbered the old gentleman lifted his legs awkwardly once or twice, as if they were very clumsy and imperfect pieces of machinery, and then looking down on his own side of the wall, burst into a loud laugh.

"It's you, is it?" said the old gentleman.

"Yes, it's me," replied a gruff voice.

"How's the Emperor of Tartary?" said the old gentleman.

"Oh! he's much the same as usual," was the reply. "No better and no worse."

"The young Prince of China," said the old gentleman, with much interest. "Is he reconciled to his father-in-law, the great potato salesman?"

"No," answered the gruff voice; "and he says he never will be, that's more."

"If that's the case," observed the old gentleman, "perhaps I'd better come down."

"Well," said the man on the other side, "I think you had, perhaps."

One of the hands being then cautiously unclasped, the old gentleman dropped into a sitting posture, and was looking round to smile and bow to Mrs. Nickleby, when he disappeared with some precipitation, as if his legs had been pulled from below.

Very much relieved by his disappearance, Kate was turning to speak to her mama, when the dirty hands again

became visible, and were immediately followed by the figure of a coarse squat man, who ascended by the steps which had been recently occupied by their singular neighbour.

"Beg your pardon, ladies," said this new comer, grinning and touching his hat. "Has he been making love to either of you?"

"Yes," said Kate.

"Ah!" rejoined the man, taking his handkerchief out of his hat and wiping his face, "he always will, you know. Nothing will prevent his making love."

"I need not ask you if he is out of his mind, poor creature," said Kate.

"Why no," replied the man, looking into his hat, throwing his handkerchief in at one dab, and putting it on again. "That's pretty plain, that is."

"Has he been long so?" asked Kate.

"A long while."

"And is there no hope for him?" said Kate, compassionately.

"Not a bit, and don't deserve to be," replied the keeper. "He's a deal pleasanter without his senses than with 'em. He was the cruelest, wickedest, out-and-outerest old flint that ever drawed breath."

"Indeed!" said Kate.

"By George!" replied the keeper, shaking his head so emphatically that he was obliged to frown to keep his hat on, "I never came across such a vagabond, and my mate says the same. Broke his poor wife's heart, turned his daughters out of doors, drove his sons into the streets—it was a blessing he went mad at last, through evil tempers, and covetousness, and selfishness, and guzzling, and drinking, or he'd have drove many others so. Hope for *him*, an old rip! There isn't too much hope going, but I'll bet a crown that what there is, is saved for more deserving chaps than him, anyhow."

With which confession of his faith, the keeper shook his head again, as much as to say that nothing short of this would do, if things were to go on at all; and touching his hat sulkily—not that he was in an ill humour, but that his subject ruffled him—descended the ladder, and took it away.

During this conversation, Mrs. Nickleby had regarded the man with a severe and steadfast look. She now heaved

a profound sigh, and pursing up her lips, shook her head in a slow and doubtful manner.

"Poor creature!" said Kate.

"Ah! poor indeed!" rejoined Mrs. Nickleby. "It's shameful that such things should be allowed—shameful!"

"How can they be helped, mama?" said Kate, mournfully. "The infirmities of nature—"

"Nature!" said Mrs. Nickleby. "What! Do *you* suppose this poor gentleman is out of his mind?"

"Can anybody who sees him entertain any other opinion, mama?"

"Why then, I just tell you this, Kate," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "that he is nothing of the kind, and I am surprised you can be so imposed upon. It's some plot of these people to possess themselves of his property—didn't he say so himself? He may be a little odd and flighty, perhaps, many of us are that; but downright mad! and express himself as he does, respectfully, and in quite poetical language, and making offers with so much thought, and care, and prudence—not as if he ran into the streets, and went down upon his knees to the first chit of a girl he met, as a madman would! No, no, Kate, there's a great deal too much method in *his* madness; depend upon that, my dear."

CHAPTER XLII.

ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE CONVIVIAL SENTIMENT, THAT THE BEST OF FRIENDS MUST SOMETIMES PART.

THE pavement of Snow Hill had been baking and frying all day in the heat, and the twain Saracens' heads guarding the entrance to the hostelry of whose name and sign they are the duplicate presentments, looked—or seemed in the eyes of jaded and footsore passers-by, to look—more conscious than usual, after blistering and scorching in the sun, when, in one of the inn's smallest sitting-rooms, through whose open window there rose, in a palpable steam, wholesome exhalations from reeking coach-horses, the usual furniture of a tea-table was displayed in neat and

inviting order, flanked by large joints of roast and boiled, a tongue, a pigeon-pie, a cold fowl, a tankard of ale, and other little matters of the like kind, which, in degenerate towns and cities are generally understood to belong more particularly to solid lunches, stage-coach dinners, or unusually substantial breakfasts.

Mr. John Browdie, with his hands in his pockets, hovered restlessly about these delicacies, stopping occasionally to whisk the flies out of the sugar-basin with his wife's pocket-handkerchief, or to dip a tea-spoon in the milk-pot and carry it to his mouth, or to cut off a little knob of crust, and a little corner of meat, and swallow them at two gulps like a couple of pills. After every one of these flirtations with the eatables, he pulled out his watch, and declared with an earnestness quite pathetic that he couldn't undertake to hold out two minutes longer.

"Tilly!" said John to his lady, who was reclining half awake and half asleep upon a sofa.

"Well, John!"

"Weel, John!" retorted her husband, impatiently. "Dost thou feel hoongry, lass?"

"Not very," said Mrs. Browdie.

"Not vary!" repeated John, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Hear her say not vary, and us dining at three, and loonching off pasthry thot aggravates a mon 'stead of pacifying him! Not vary!"

"Here's a gen'l'man for you, Sir," said the waiter, looking in

"A wa'at, for me?" said John, as though he thought it must be a letter, or a parcel.

"A gen'l'man, Sir."

"Stars and garthers, chap!" said John, "wa'at dost thou coom and say thot for? In wi' 'un."

"Are you at home, Sir?"

"At whoam!" cried John, "I wish I wur; I'd ha' tea'd two hour ago. Why, I told t'oother chap to look sharp ootside door, and tell 'un d'rectly he coom, thot we war faint wi' hoonger. In wi' 'un. Aha! Thee hond, Misther Nickleby. This is nigh to be the proodest day o' my life, Sir. Hoo be all wi' ye? Ding! But, I'm glod o' this!"

Quite forgetting even his hunger in the heartiness of his salutation, John Browdie shook Nicholas by the hand again

and again, slapping his palm with great violence between each shake, to add warmth to the reception.

"Ah! there she be," said John, observing the look which Nicholas directed towards his wife. "There she be—we shan't quarrel about her noo—Eh? Ecod, when I think o' thot—but thou want'st soom'at to eat. Fall to, mun, fall to, and for wa'at we're aboot to receive——"

No doubt the grace was properly finished, but nothing more was heard, for John had already begun to play such a knife and fork, that his speech was, for the time, gone.

"I shall take the usual licence, Mr. Browdie," said Nicholas, as he placed a chair for the bride.

"Tak' whatever thou like'st," said John, "and when a's gane, ca' for more."

Without stopping to explain, Nicholas kissed the blushing Mrs. Browdie, and handed her to her seat.

"I say," said John, rather astounded for the moment, "mak' theeself quite at whoam, will 'ee?"

"You may depend upon that," replied Nicholas; "on one condition."

"And wa'at may thot be?" asked John.

"That you make me a godfather the very first time you have occasion for one."

"Eh! d'ye hear thot!" cried John, laying down his knife and fork. "A godfeyther! Ha! ha! ha! Tilly—hear till 'un—a godfeyther! Divn't say a word more, ye'll never beat thot. Occasion for 'un—a godfeyther! Ha! ha! ha!"

Never was a man so tickled with a respectable old joke, as John Browdie was with this. He chuckled, roared, half-suffocated himself by laughing large pieces of beef into his wind-pipe, roared again, persisted in eating at the same time, got red in the face and black in the forehead, coughed, cried, got better, went off again laughing inwardly, got worse, choked, had his back thumped, stamped about, frightened his wife, and at last recovered in a state of the last exhaustion and with the water streaming from his eyes, but still faintly ejaculating "A godfeyther—a godfeyther, Tilly!" in a tone bespeaking an exquisite relish of the sally, which no suffering could diminish.

"You remember the night of our first tea-drinking?" said Nicholas.

"Shall I e'er forget it, mun?" replied John Browdie.

"He was a desperate fellow that night though, was he not, Mrs. Browdie?" said Nicholas. "Quite a monster?"

"If you had only heard him as we were going home, Mr. Nickleby, you'd have said so indeed," returned the bride. "I never was so frightened in all my life."

"Coom, coom," said John, with a broad grin; "thou know'st betther than thot, Tilly."

"So I was," replied Mrs. Browdie. "I almost made up my mind never to speak to you again."

"A'most!" said John, with a broader grin than the last. "A'most made up her mind! And she wur coaxin', and coaxin', and wheedlin', and wheedlin' a' the blessed wa'. 'Wa'at didst thou let yon chap mak' oop tiv'ee for?' says I. 'I deedn't, John,' says she, a squeedgin my arm. 'You deedn't?' says I. 'Noa,' says she, a squeedgin' of me agean."

"Lor, John!" interposed his pretty wife, colouring very much. "How can you talk such nonsense? As if I should have dreamt of such a thing!"

"I dinnot know whether thou'd ever dreamt of it, though I think that's loike eneaf, mind," retorted John; "but thou didst it. 'Ye're a feeckle, changeable weathercock, lass,' says I. 'Not feeckle, John,' says she. 'Yes,' says I, 'feeckle, dom'd feeckle. Dinnot tell me thou bean't, efther yon chap at schoolmeasther's,' says I. 'Him!' says she, quite screeching. 'Ah! him!' says I. 'Why, John,' says she—and she coom a deal closer and squeedged a deal harder than she'd deane afore—'dost thou think it's nat'ral noo, that having such a proper mun as thou to keep company wi', I'd ever tak' oop wi' such a leetle scanty whipper-snapper as yon?' she says. Ha! ha! ha! She said whipper-snapper! 'Ecod!' I says, 'efther thot, neame the day, and let's have it ower!' Ha! ha! ha!"

Nicholas laughed very heartily at this story, both on account of its telling against himself, and his being desirous to spare the blushes of Mrs. Browdie, whose protestations were drowned in peals of laughter from her husband. His good-nature soon put her at her ease; and although she still denied the charge, she laughed so heartily at it, that Nicholas had the satisfaction of feeling assured that in all essential respects it was strictly true.

"This is the second time," said Nicholas, "that we have

ever taken a meal together, and only the third I have ever seen you; and yet it really seems to me as if I were among old friends."

"Weel!" observed the Yorkshireman, "so I say."

"And I am sure I do," added his young wife.

"I have the best reason to be impressed with the feeling, mind," said Nicholas; "for if it had not been for your kindness of heart, my good friend, when I had no right or reason to expect it, I know not what might have become of me or what plight I should have been in by this time."

"Talk aboot soom'at else," replied John, gruffly, "and dinnot bother."

"It must be a new song to the same tune then," said Nicholas, smiling. "I told you in my letter that I deeply felt and admired your sympathy with that poor lad, whom you released at the risk of involving yourself in trouble and difficulty; but I can never tell you how grateful he and I, and others whom you don't know, are to you for taking pity on him."

"Ecod!" rejoined John Browdie, drawing up his chair; "and I can never tell *you* hoo gratful soom folks that we do know would be loikewise, if *they* know'd I had takken pity on him."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Browdie, "what a state I was in, that night!"

"Were they at all disposed to give you credit for assisting in the escape?" inquired Nicholas of Browdie.

"Not a bit," replied the Yorkshireman, extending his mouth from ear to ear. "There I lay, snoog in schoolmeasther's bed long efther it was dark, and nobody coom nigh the pleace. 'Weel!' thinks I, 'he's got a pretty good start, and if he bean't whoam by noo, he never will be; so you may coom as quick as you loike, and foind us reddy' —that is, you know, schoolmeasther might coom."

"I understand," said Nicholas.

"Presently," resumed John, "he *did* coom. I heerd door shut doon-stairs, and him a warking oop in the daark. 'Slow and steddy,' I says to myself, 'tak' your time, Sir —no hurry.' He cooms to the door, turns the key—turns the key when there warn't nothing to hoold the lock—and ca's oot 'Hallo there!'—'Yes,' thinks I, 'you may do thot agean, and not wakken anybody, Sir.' 'Hallo

there,' he says, and then he stops. 'Thou'd betther not aggravate me,' says schoolmeasther, efther a little time. 'I'll brak' every boan in your boddy, Smike,' he says, efther another little time. Then all of a' soodden, he sings oot for a loight, and when it cooms—ecod, such a hoorly-boorly! 'Wa'at's the matter?' says I. 'He's gane,' says he,—stark mad wi' vengeance. 'Have you heerd nought?' Ees,' says I, 'I heerd street door shut, no time at a' ago. I heerd a person run doon there' (pointing t'other wa'—eh?) 'Help!' he cries. 'I'll help you,' says I; and off we set—the wrong wa'! Ho! ho! ho!"

"Did you go far?" asked Nicholas.

"Far!" replied John; "I run him clean off his legs in quarther of an hoor. To see old schoolmeasther wi'out his hat, skimming along oop to his knees in mud and wather, tumbling over fences, and rowling into ditches, and bawling oot like mad, wi' his one eye looking sharp out for the lad, and his coat-tails flying out behind, and him spattered wi' mud all ower, face and all;—I thot I should ha' dropped doon, and killed myself wi' laughing."

John laughed so heartily at the mere recollection, that he communicated the contagion to both his hearers, and all three burst into peals of laughter, which were renewed again and again, until they could laugh no longer.

"He's a bad 'un," said John, wiping his eyes; "a vary bad 'un, is schoolmeasther."

"I can't bear the sight of him, John," said the wife.

"Coom," retorted John, "thot's tidy in you, thot is. If it wa'nt along o' you, we shouldn't know nought aboot 'un. Thou know'd 'un first, Tilly, didn't thou?"

"I couldn't help knowing Fanny Squeers, John," returned his wife; "she was an old playmate of mine, you know."

"Weel," replied John, "dean't I say so, lass? It's best to be neighbourly, and keep up old acquaintance loike; and what I say is, dean't quarrel if 'ee can help it. Dinnot think so, Mr. Nickleby?"

"Certainly," returned Nicholas; "and you acted upon that principle when I met you on horseback on the road, after our memorable evening."

"Sure-ly," said John. "Wa'at I say, I stick by."

"And that's a fine thing to do, and manly too," said

Nicholas, "though it's not exactly what we understand by 'coming Yorkshire over us' in London. Miss Squeers is stopping with you, you said in your note."

"Yes," replied John, "Tilly's bridesmaid; and a queer bridesmaid she be, too. She wean't be a bride in a hurry, I reckon."

"For shame, John," said Mrs. Browdie; with an acute perception of the joke though, being a bride herself.

"The groom will be a blessed mun," said John, his eyes twinkling at the idea. "He'll be in luck, he will."

"You see, Mr. Nickleby," said his wife, "that it was in consequence of her being here, that John wrote to you and fixed to-night, because we thought that it wouldn't be pleasant for you to meet, after what has passed—"

"Unquestionably. You were quite right in that," said Nicholas, interrupting.

"Especially," observed Mrs. Browdie, looking very sly, "after what we know about past and gone love matters."

"We know, indeed!" said Nicholas, shaking his head. "You behaved rather wickedly there, I suspect."

"O' course she did," said John Browdie, passing his huge fore-finger through one of his wife's pretty ringlets, and looking very proud of her. "She wur always as skittish and full o' tricks as a——"

"Well, as a what?" said his wife.

"As a woman," returned John. "Ding! But I dinnot know ought else that cooms near it."

"You were speaking about Miss Squeers," said Nicholas, with the view of stopping some slight connubialities which had begun to pass between Mr. and Mrs. Browdie, and which rendered the position of a third party in some degree embarrassing, as occasioning him to feel rather in the way than otherwise.

"Oh yes," rejoined Mrs. Browdie. "John, ha' done—John fixed to-night, because she had settled that she would go and drink tea with her father. And to make quite sure of there being nothing amiss, and of your being quite alone with us, he settled to go out there and fetch her home."

"That was a very good arrangement," said Nicholas; "though I am sorry to be the occasion of so much trouble."

"Not the least in the world," returned Mrs. Browdie; "for we have looked forward to seeing you—John and I have—with the greatest possible pleasure. Do you know,

Mr. Nickleby," said Mrs. Browdie, with her archest smile, "that I really think Fanny Squeers was very fond of you."

"I am very much obliged to her," said Nicholas; "but, upon my word, I never aspired to making any impression upon her virgin heart?"

"How you talk!" tittered Mrs. Browdie. "No, but do you know that really—seriously now and without any joking—I was given to understand by Fanny herself, that you had made an offer to her, and that you two were going to be engaged quite solemn and regular."

"Was you, ma'am—was you?" cried a shrill female voice, "was you given to understand that I—I—was going to be engaged to an assassinating thief that shed the gore of my pa? Do you—do you think, ma'am—that I was very fond of such dirt beneath my feet, as I couldn't condescend to touch with kitchen tongs, without blacking and crocking myself by the contract? Do you, ma'am—do you? Oh! base and degrading 'Tilda!"

With these reproaches Miss Squeers flung the door wide open, and disclosed to the eyes of the astonished Browdies and Nicholas, not only her own symmetrical form, arrayed in the chaste white garments before described (a little dirtier), but the form of her brother and father, the pair of Wackfords.

"This is the hend, is it?" continued Miss Squeers, who, being excited, aspirated her h's strongly; "this is the hend, is it, of all my forbearance and friendship for that double-faced thing—that viper, that—that—mermaid?" (Miss Squeers hesitated a long time for this last epithet, and brought it out triumphantly at last, as if it quite clinched the business.) "This is the hend, is it, of all my bearing with her deceitfulness, her lowness, her falseness, her laying herself out to catch the admiration of vulgar minds, in a way which made me blush for my—my——"

"Gender," suggested Mr. Squeers, regarding the spectators with a malevolent eye—literally *a* malevolent eye.

"Yes," said Miss Squeers; "but I thank my stars that my ma is of the same——"

"Hear, hear!" remarked Mr. Squeers; "and I wish she was here to have a scratch at this company."

"This is the hend, is it," said Miss Squeers, tossing her

head, and looking contemptuously at the floor, "of my taking notice of that rubbishing creature, and demeaning myself to patronise her?"

"Oh, come," rejoined Mrs. Browdie, disregarding all the endeavours of her spouse to restrain her, and forcing herself into a front row, "don't talk such nonsense as that."

"Have I not patronised you, ma'am?" demanded Miss Squeers.

"No," returned Mrs. Browdie.

"I will not look for blushes in such a quarter," said Miss Squeers, haughtily, "for that countenance is a stranger to everything but hignominiousness and red-faced boldness."

"I say," interposed John Browdie, nettled by these accumulated attacks on his wife, "dra' it mild, dra' it mild."

"You, Mr. Browdie," said Miss Squeers, taking him up very quickly, "I pity. I have no feeling for you, Sir, but one of unliquidated pity."

"Oh!" said John.

"No," said Miss Squeers, looking sideways at her parent, "although I *am* a queer bridesmaid, and *shan't* be a bride in a hurry, and although my husband *will* be in luck, I entertain no sentiments towards you, Sir, but sentiments of pity."

Here Miss Squeers looked sideways at her father again, who looked sideways at her, as much as to say, "There you had him."

"*I* know what you've got to go through," said Miss Squeers, shaking her curls violently "*I* know what life is before you, and if you was my bitterest and deadliest enemy, I could wish you nothing worse."

"Couldn't you wish to be married to him yourself, if that was the case?" inquired Mrs. Browdie, with great suavity of manner.

"Oh, ma'am, how witty you are!" retorted Miss Squeers, with a low curtsey, "almost as witty, ma'am, as you are clever. How very clever it was in you, ma'am, to choose a time when I had gone to tea with my pa, and was sure not to come back without being fetched! What a pity you never thought that other people might be as clever as yourself, and spoil your plans!"

"You won't vex me, child, with such airs as these," said the late Miss Price, assuming the matron.

"Don't *Missis* me, ma'am, if you please," returned Miss Squeers, sharply. "I'll not bear it. Is *this* the hend——"

"Dang it a'," cried John Browdie, impatiently. "Say thee say out, Fanny, and mak sure it's the end, and dinnot ask nobody whether it is or not."

"Thanking you for your advice which was not required, Mr. Browdie," returned Miss Squeers, with laborious politeness, "have the goodness not to presume to meddle with my Christian name. Even my pity shall never make me forget what's due to myself, Mr. Browdie. 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, with such a sudden accession of violence that John started in his boots, "I throw you off for ever, Miss. I abandon you, I renounce you. I wouldn't," cried Miss Squeers in a solemn voice, "have a child named 'Tilda—not to save it from its grave."

"As for the matther o' that," observed John, "it'll be time eneaf to think aboot neaming of it when it cooms."

"John!" interposed his wife, "don't tease her."

"Oh! Tease, indeed!" cried Miss Squeers, bridling up. "Tease, indeed! He! he! Tease, too! No, don't tease her. Consider her feelings, pray."

"If it's fated that listeners are never to hear any good of themselves," cried Mrs. Browdie, "I can't help it, and I am very sorry for it. But I will say, Fanny, that times out of number I have spoken so kindly of you behind your back, that even you could have found no fault with what I said."

"Oh, I dare say not, ma'am!" cried Miss Squeers, with another curtsey. "Best thanks to you for your goodness, and begging and praying you not to be hard upon me another time!"

"I don't know," resumed Mrs. Browdie, "that I have said anything very bad of you, even now—at all events, what I did say was quite true; but if I have, I am very sorry for it, and I beg your pardon. You have said much worse of me, scores of times, Fanny; but I have never borne any malice to you, and I hope you'll not bear any to me."

Miss Squeers made no more direct reply than surveying her former friend from top to toe, and elevating her nose in the air with ineffable disdain. But some indistinct allusions to a "puss," and a "minx," and a "contemptible creature," escaped her; and this, together with a severe biting

of the lips, great difficulty in swallowing, and very frequent comings and goings of breath, seemed to imply that feelings were swelling in Miss Squeers's bosom too great for utterance.

While the foregoing conversation was proceeding, Master Wackford, finding himself unnoticed, and feeling his preponderating inclinations strong upon him, had by little and little sidled up to the table and attacked the food with such slight skirmishing as drawing his fingers round and round the inside of the plates, and afterwards sucking them with infinite relish—picking the bread, and dragging the pieces over the surface of the butter—pocketing lumps of sugar, pretending all the time to be absorbed in thought—and so forth. Finding that no interference was attempted with these small liberties, he gradually mounted to greater, and, after helping himself to a moderately good cold collation, was, by this time, deep in the pie.

Nothing of this had been unobserved by Mr. Squeers, who, so long as the attention of the company was fixed upon other objects, hugged himself to think that his son and heir should be fattening at the enemy's expense. But there being now an appearance of a temporary calm, in which the proceedings of little Wackford could scarcely fail to be observed, he feigned to be aware of the circumstance for the first time, and inflicted upon the face of that young gentleman a slap that made the very tea-cups ring.

"Eating," cried Mr. Squeers, "of what his father's enemies has left! It's fit to go and poison you, you unnat'ral boy."

"It wean't hurt him," said John, apparently very much relieved by the prospect of having a man in the quarrel; "let 'un eat. I wish the whole school was here. I'd give 'em soom'ut to stay their unfort'nate stomachs wi', if I spent the last penny I had!"

Squeers scowled at him with the worst and most malicious expression of which his face was capable—it was a face of remarkable capability, too, in that way—and shook his fist stealthily.

"Coom, coom, schoolmeasther," said John, "dinnot make a fool o' thyself; for if I was to sheake mine—only once—thou'd fa' doon wi' the wind o' it."

"It was you, was it," returned Squeers, "that helped off my runaway boy? It was you, was it?"

"Me!" returned John, in a loud tone. "Yes, it wa' me, coom; wa'at o' that! It wa' me. Noo then!"

"You hear him say he did it, my child!" said Squeers, appealing to his daughter. "You hear him say he did it!"

"Did it!" cried John. "I'll tell 'ee more; hear this, too. If thou'd got another roonaway boy, I'd do it agean. If thou'd got twonty roonaway boys, I'd do it twonty times ower, and twonty more to thot; and I tell thee more," said John, "noo my blood is oop, that thou'rt an old ra'ascal; and that it's weel for thou, thou be'st an old 'un, or I'd ha poonded thee to flour when thou told an honest mun hoo' thou'd licked that poor chap in t' coorch."

"An honest man!" cried Squeers, with a sneer.

"Ah! An honest man," replied John; "honest in ought but ever putting legs under seame table wi' such as thou."

"Scandal!" said Squeers, exultingly. "Two witnesses to it; Wackford knows the nature of an oath, he does—we shall have you there, Sir. Rascal, eh?" Mr. Squeers took out his pocket-book and made a note of it.—"Very good. I should say that was worth full twenty pound at the next assizes, without the honesty, Sir."

"'Soizes," cried John, "thou'd betther not to talk to me o' 'Soizes. Yorkshire schools have been shown up at 'Soizes afore noo, mun, and it's a ticklish soobject to revive, I can tell ye."

Mr. Squeers shook his head in a threatening manner, looking very white with passion; and taking his daughter's arm, and dragging little Wackford by the hand, retreated towards the door.

"As for you," said Squeers, turning round and addressing Nicholas, who, as he had caused him to smart pretty soundly on a former occasion, purposely abstained from taking any part in the discussion, "see if I ain't down upon you before long. You'll go a kidnapping of boys, will you? Take care their fathers don't turn up—mark that—take care their fathers don't turn up, and send 'em back to me to do as I like with, in spite of you."

"I am not afraid of that," replied Nicholas, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, and turning away.

"Ain't you!" retorted Squeers, with a diabolical look. "Now then, come along."

"I leave such society, with my pa, for *h*ever," said Miss

Squeers, looking contemptuously and loftily round. "I am defiled by breathing the air with such creatures. Poor Mr. Browdie! He! he! he! I do pity him, that I do; he's so deluded! He! he! he!——Artful and designing 'Tilda!"

With this sudden relapse into the sternest and most majestic wrath, Miss Squeers swept from the room; and having sustained her dignity until the last possible moment, was heard to sob and scream and struggle in the passage.

John Browdie remained standing behind the table, looking from his wife to Nicholas, and back again, with his mouth wide open, until his hand accidentally fell upon the tankard of ale, when he took it up, and having obscured his features therewith for some time, drew a long breath, handed it over to Nicholas, and rang the bell.

"Here, waither," said John, briskly. "Look alive here. Tak' these things awa', and let's have soomat broiled for sooper—vary comfortable and plenty o' it—at ten o'clock. Bring soom brandy and soom wather, and a pair o' slippers—the largest pair in the house—and be quick aboot it. Dash ma' wig!" said John, rubbing his hands, "there's no ganging oot to neeght, noo, to fetch anybody whoam, and ecod we'll begin to spend the evening in airnest."

CHAPTER XLIII.

OFFICIATES AS A KIND OF GENTLEMAN USHER, IN BRINGING VARIOUS PEOPLE TOGETHER.

The storm had long given place to a calm the most profound, and the evening was pretty far advanced—indeed supper was over, and the process of digestion proceeding as favourably as, under the influence of complete tranquillity, cheerful conversation, and a moderate allowance of brandy and water, most wise men conversant with the anatomy and functions of the human frame will consider that it ought to have proceeded, when the three friends, or as one might say, both in a civil and religious sense, and with proper deference and regard to the holy state of matrimony, the two friends (Mr. and Mrs. Browdie counting as no more than one), were startled by the noise of loud

and angry threatenings below-stairs, which presently attained so high a pitch, and were conveyed besides in language so towering, sanguinary, and ferocious, that it could hardly have been surpassed, if there had actually been a Saracen's head then present in the establishment, supported on the shoulders and surmounting the trunk of a real, live, furious, and most unappeasable Saracen.

This turmoil, instead of quickly subsiding after the first outburst (as turmoils not unfrequently do, whether in taverns, legislative assemblies, or elsewhere), into a mere grumbling and growling squabble, increased every moment; and although the whole din appeared to be raised by but one pair of lungs, yet that one pair was of so powerful a quality, and repeated such words as "scoundrel," "rascal," "insolent puppy," and a variety of expletives no less flattering to the party addressed, with such great relish and strength of tone, that a dozen voices raised in concert under any ordinary circumstances would have made far less uproar and created much smaller consternation.

"Why, what's the matter?" said Nicholas, moving hastily towards the door.

John Browdie was striding in the same direction when Mrs. Browdie turned pale, and, leaning back in her chair, requested him with a faint voice to take notice, that if he ran into any danger it was her intention to fall into hysterics immediately, and that the consequences might be more serious than he thought for. John looked rather disconcerted by this intelligence, though there was a lurking grin on his face at the same time; but, being quite unable to keep out of the fray, he compromised the matter by tucking his wife's arm under his own, and, thus accompanied, following Nicholas down-stairs with all speed.

The passage outside the coffee-room door was the scene of disturbance, and here were congregated the coffee-room customers and waiters, together with two or three coachmen and helpers from the yard. These had hastily assembled round a young man who from his appearance might have been a year or two older than Nicholas, and who, besides having given utterance to the defiances just now described, seemed to have proceeded to even greater lengths in his indignation, inasmuch as his feet had no other covering than a pair of stockings, while a couple of slippers lay at no great distance from the head of a prostrate figure in an

opposite corner, who bore the appearance of having been shot into his present retreat by means of a kick, and complimented by having the slippers flung about his ears afterwards.

The coffee-room customers, and the waiters, and the coachmen, and the helpers—not to mention a bar-maid who was looking on from behind an open sash window—seemed at that moment, if a spectator might judge from their winks, nods, and muttered exclamations, strongly disposed to take part against the young gentleman in the stockings. Observing this, and that the young gentleman was nearly of his own age and had in nothing the appearance of an habitual brawler, Nicholas, impelled by such feelings as will influence young men sometimes, felt a very strong disposition to side with the weaker party, and so thrust himself at once into the centre of the group, and in a more emphatic tone perhaps than circumstances might seem to warrant, demanded what all that noise was about.

"Hello!" said one of the men from the yard, "This is somebody in disguise, this is."

"Room for the eldest son of the Emperor of Roosher, gen'l'men!" cried another fellow.

Disregarding these sallies, which were uncommonly well received, as sallies at the expense of the best-dressed persons in a crowd usually are, Nicholas glanced carelessly round, and addressing the young gentleman, who had by this time picked up his slippers and thrust his feet into them, repeated his inquiries with a courteous air.

"A mere nothing!" he replied.

At this, a murmur was raised by the lookers-on, and some of the boldest cried, "Oh, indeed!—Wasn't it, though?—Nothing, eh?—He called that nothing, did he? —Lucky for him if he found it nothing." These and many other expressions of ironical disapprobation having been exhausted, two or three of the out-of-door fellows began to hustle Nicholas and the young gentleman who had made the noise: stumbling against them by accident, and treading on their toes, and so forth. But this being a round game, and one not necessarily limited to three or four players, was open to John Browdie too, who, bursting into the little crowd—to the great terror of his wife—and falling about in all directions, now to the right, now to the left, now forwards, now backwards, and accidentally driving his elbow through the hat of the tallest helper, who

had been particularly active, speedily caused the odds to wear a very different appearance; while more than one stout fellow limped away to a respectful distance, anathematising with tears in his eyes the heavy tread and ponderous feet of the burly Yorkshireman.

"Let me see him do it again," said he who had been kicked into the corner, rising as he spoke, apparently more from the fear of John Browdie's inadvertently treading upon him, than from any desire to place himself on equal terms with his late adversary. "Let me see him do it again. That's all."

"Let me hear you make those remarks again," said the young man, "and I'll knock that head of yours in among the wine-glasses behind you there."

Here a waiter who had been rubbing his hands in excessive enjoyment of the scene, so long as only the breaking of heads was in question, adjured the spectators with great earnestness to fetch the police, declaring that otherwise murder would be surely done, and that he was responsible for all the glass and china on the premises.

"No one need trouble himself to stir," said the young gentleman, "I am going to remain in the house all night, and shall be found here in the morning if there is any assault to answer for."

"What did you strike him for?" asked one of the bystanders.

"Ah! What did you strike him for?" demanded the others.

The unpopular gentleman looked coolly round, and addressing himself to Nicholas, said:—

"You inquired just now what was the matter here. The matter is simply this. Yonder person, who was drinking with a friend in the coffee-room when I took my seat there for half an hour before going to bed (for I have just come off a journey, and preferred stopping here to-night, to going home at this hour, where I was not expected until to-morrow), chose to express himself in very disrespectful, and insolently familiar terms, of a young lady, whom I recognised from his description and other circumstances, and whom I have the honour to know. As he spoke loud enough to be overheard by the other guests who were present, I informed him most civilly that he was mistaken in his conjectures, which were of an offensive nature, and re-

quested him to forbear. He did so for a little time, but as he chose to renew his conversation when leaving the room, in a more offensive strain than before, I could not refrain from making after him, and facilitating his departure by a kick, which reduced him to the posture in which you saw him just now. I am the best judge of my own affairs, I take it," said the young man, who had certainly not quite recovered from his recent heat, "if anybody here thinks proper to make this quarrel his own, I have not the smallest earthly objection, I do assure him."

Of all possible courses of proceeding under the circumstances detailed, there was certainly not one which, in his then state of mind, could have appeared more laudable to Nicholas than this. There were not many subjects of dispute which at that moment could have come home to his own breast more powerfully, for having the unknown uppermost in his thoughts, it naturally occurred to him that he would have done just the same if any audacious gossiper durst have presumed in his hearing to speak lightly of her. Influenced by these considerations, he espoused the young gentleman's quarrel with great warmth, protesting that he had done quite right, and that he respected him for it; which John Browdie (albeit not quite clear as to the merits) immediately protested too, with not inferior vehemence.

"Let him take care, that's all," said the defeated party, who was being rubbed down by a waiter, after his recent fall on the dusty boards. "He don't knock me about for nothing, I can tell him that. A pretty state of things, if a man isn't to admire a handsome girl without being beat to pieces for it!"

This reflection appeared to have great weight with the young lady in the bar, who (adjusting her cap as she spoke, and glancing at a mirror) declared that it would be a very pretty state of things indeed; and that if people were to be punished for actions so innocent and natural as that, there would be more people to be knocked down than there would be people to knock them down, and that she wondered what the gentleman meant by it, that she did.

"My dear girl," said the young gentleman in a low voice, advancing towards the sash window.

"Nonsense, Sir!" replied the young lady sharply, smiling though as she turned aside, and biting her lip (whereat

Mrs. Browdie, who was still standing on the stairs, glanced at her with disdain, and called to her husband to come away).

"No, but listen to me," said the young man. "If admiration of a pretty face were criminal, I should be the most hopeless person alive, for I cannot resist one. It has the most extraordinary effect upon me, checks and controls me in the most furious and obstinate mood. You see what an effect yours has had upon me already."

"Oh, that's very pretty," replied the young lady, tossing her head, "but——"

"Yes, I know it's very pretty," said the young man, looking with an air of admiration in the bar-maid's face, "I said so, you know, just this moment. But beauty should be spoken of respectfully—respectfully, and in proper terms, and with a becoming sense of its worth and excellence, whereas this fellow has no more notion——"

The young lady interrupted the conversation at this point, by thrusting her head out of the bar-window, and inquiring of the waiter in a shrill voice whether that young man who had been knocked down was going to stand in the passage all night, or whether the entrance was to be left clear for other people. The waiters taking the hint, and communicating it to the hostlers, were not slow to change their tone too, and the result was, that the unfortunate victim was bundled out in a twinkling.

"I am sure I have seen that fellow before," said Nicholas.

"Indeed!" replied his new acquaintance.

"I am certain of it," said Nicholas, pausing to reflect. "Where can I have—stop!—yes, to be sure—he belongs to a register-office up at the West End of the town. I knew I recollected the face."

It was, indeed, Tom—the ugly clerk.

"That's odd enough!" said Nicholas, ruminating upon the strange manner in which that register-office seemed to start up and stare him in the face every now and then, and when he least expected it.

"I am much obliged to you for your kind advocacy of my cause when it most needed an advocate," said the young man, laughing, and drawing a card from his pocket. "Perhaps you'll do me the favour to let me know where I can thank you."

Nicholas took the card, and glancing at it involuntarily as he returned the compliment, evinced very great surprise.

"Mr. Frank Cheeryble!" said Nicholas. "Surely not the nephew of Cheeryble Brothers, who was expected to-morrow!"

"I don't usually call myself the nephew of the firm," returned Mr. Frank, good-humouredly, "but of the two excellent individuals who compose it, I am proud to say I *am* the nephew. And you, I see, are Mr. Nickleby, of whom I have heard so much! This is a most unexpected meeting, but not the less welcome, I assure you."

Nicholas responded to these compliments with others of the same kind, and they shook hands warmly. Then he introduced John Browdie, who had remained in a state of great admiration ever since the young lady in the bar had been so skilfully won over to the right side. Then Mrs. John Browdie was introduced, and finally they all went up-stairs together and spent the next half hour with great satisfaction and mutual entertainment; Mrs. John Browdie beginning the conversation by declaring that of all the made-up things she ever saw, that young woman below-stairs was the vainest and the plainest.

This Mr. Frank Cheeryble, although, to judge from what had recently taken place, a hot-headed young man (which is not an absolute miracle and phenomenon in nature), was a sprightly, good-humoured, pleasant fellow, with much both in his countenance and disposition that reminded Nicholas very strongly of the kind-hearted brothers. His manner was as unaffected as theirs, and his demeanour full of that heartiness which, to most people who have anything generous in their composition, is peculiarly prepossessing. Add to this, that he was good-looking and intelligent, had a plentiful share of vivacity, was extremely cheerful, and accommodated himself in five minutes' time to all John Browdie's oddities with as much ease as if he had known him from a boy; and it will be a source of no great wonder that, when they parted for the night, he had produced a most favourable impression, not only upon the worthy Yorkshireman and his wife, but upon Nicholas also, who, revolving all these things in his mind as he made the best of his way home, arrived at the conclusion that he had laid the foundation of a most agreeable and desirable acquaintance.

"But it's a most extraordinary thing about that register-office fellow!" thought Nicholas. "Is it likely that this nephew can know anything about that beautiful girl? When Tim Linkinwater gave me to understand the other day that he was coming to take a share in the business here, he said he had been superintending it in Germany for four years, and that during the last six months he had been engaged in establishing an agency in the north of England. That's four years and a half—four years and a half. She can't be more than seventeen—say eighteen at the outside. She was quite a child when he went away, then. I should say he knew nothing about her and had never seen her, so *he* can give me no information. At all events," thought Nicholas, coming to the real point in his mind, "there can be no danger of any prior occupation of her affections in that quarter; that's quite clear."

Is selfishness a necessary ingredient in the composition of that passion called love, or does it deserve all the fine things which poets, in the exercise of their undoubted vocation, have said of it? There are, no doubt, authenticated instances of gentlemen having given up ladies and ladies having given up gentlemen to meritorious rivals, under circumstances of great high-mindedness; but is it quite established that the majority of such ladies and gentlemen have not made a virtue of necessity, and nobly resigned what was beyond their reach; as a private soldier might register a vow never to accept the order of the Garter, or a poor curate of great piety and learning, but of no family—save a very large family of children—might renounce a bishopric?

Here was Nicholas Nickleby, who would have scorned the thought of counting how the chances stood of his rising in favour or fortune with the Brothers Cheeryble, now that their nephew had returned, already deep in calculations whether that same nephew was likely to rival him in the affections of the fair unknown—discussing the matter with himself too, as gravely as if, with that one exception, it were all settled; and recurring to the subject again and again, and feeling quite indignant and ill-used at the notion of anybody else making love to one with whom he had never exchanged a word in all his life. To be sure, he exaggerated rather than depreciated the merits of his new acquaintance; but still he took it as a kind of personal

offence that he should have any merits at all—in the eyes of this particular young lady, that is; for elsewhere he was quite welcome to have as many as he pleased. There was undoubted selfishness in all this, and yet Nicholas was of a most free and generous nature, with as few mean or sordid thoughts, perhaps, as ever fell to the lot of any man; and there is no reason to suppose that, being in love, he felt and thought differently from other people in the like sublime condition.

He did not stop to set on foot an inquiry into his train of thought or state of feeling, however, but went thinking on all the way home, and continued to dream on in the same strain all night. For, having satisfied himself that Frank Cheeryble could have no knowledge of, or acquaintance with the mysterious young lady, it began to occur to him that even he himself might never see her again; upon which hypothesis he built up a very ingenious succession of tormenting ideas which answered his purpose even better than the vision of Mr. Frank Cheeryble, and tantalized and worried him, waking and sleeping.

Notwithstanding all that has been said and sung to the contrary, there is no well-established case of morning having either deferred or hastened its approach by the term of an hour or so for the mere gratification of a splenetic feeling against some unoffending lover: the sun having, in the discharge of his public duty, as the books of precedent report, invariably risen according to the almanacks, and without suffering himself to be swayed by any private considerations. So, morning came as usual, and with it business-hours, and with them Mr. Frank Cheeryble, and with him a long train of smiles and welcomes from the worthy brothers, and a more grave and clerk-like, but scarcely less hearty reception from Mr. Timothy Linkinwater.

"That Mr. Frank and Mr. Nickleby should have met last night," said Tim Linkinwater, getting slowly off his stool, and looking round the counting-house with his back planted against the desk, as was his custom when he had anything very particular to say—"that those two young men should have met last night in that manner is, I say, a coincidence—a remarkable coincidence. Why, I don't believe now," added Tim, taking off his spectacles, and smiling as with gentle pride, "that there's such a place in all the world for coincidences as London is."

"I don't know about that," said Mr. Frank; "but——"

"Don't know about it, Mr. Francis!" interrupted Tim, with an obstinate air. "Well, but let us know. If there is any better place for such things, where is it? Is it in Europe? No, that it isn't. Is it in Asia? Why, of course it's not. Is it in Africa? Not a bit of it. Is it in America? *You* know better than that, at all events. Well, then," said Tim, folding his arms resolutely, "where is it?"

"I was not about to dispute the point, Tim," said young Cheeryble, laughing. "I am not such a heretic as that. All I was going to say was, that I hold myself under an obligation to the coincidence, that's all."

"Oh! if you don't dispute it," said Tim, quite satisfied, "that's another thing. I'll tell you what though—I wish you had. I wish you or anybody would. I would so put that man down," said Tim, tapping the forefinger of his left hand emphatically with his spectacles, "so put that man down by argument——"

It was quite impossible to find language to express the degree of mental prostration to which such an adventurous wight would be reduced in the keen encounter with Tim Linkinwater, so Tim gave up the rest of his declaration in pure lack of words, and mounted his stool again.

"We may consider ourselves, brother Ned," said Charles, after he had patted Tim Linkinwater approvingly on the back, "very fortunate in having two such young men about us as our nephew Frank and Mr. Nickleby. It should be a source of great satisfaction and pleasure to us."

"Certainly, Charles, certainly," returned the other.

"Of Tim," added brother Ned, "I say nothing whatever, because Tim is a mere child—an infant—a nobody—that we never think of or take into account at all. Tim, you villain, what do you say to that, Sir?"

"I am jealous of both of 'em," said Tim, "and mean to look out for another situation; so provide yourselves, gentlemen, if you please."

Tim thought this such an exquisite, unparalleled, and most extraordinary joke, that he laid his pen upon the inkstand, and rather tumbling off his stool than getting down with his usual deliberation, laughed till he was quite faint, shaking his head all the time so that little particles of powder flew palpably about the office. Nor were the brothers

at all behind-hand, for they laughed almost as heartily at the ludicrous idea of any voluntary separation between themselves and old Tim. Nicholas and Mr. Frank laughed quite boisterously, perhaps to conceal some other emotion awakened by this little incident (and so, indeed, did the three old fellows after the first burst), so perhaps there was as much keen enjoyment and relish in that laugh altogether, as the politest assembly ever derived from the most poignant witticism uttered at any one person's expense.

"Mr. Nickleby," said brother Charles, calling him aside, and taking him kindly by the hand, "I—I—am anxious, my dear sir, to see that you are properly and comfortably settled in the cottage. We cannot allow those who serve us well to labour under any privation or discomfort that it is in our power to remove. I wish, too, to see your mother and sister—to know them, Mr. Nickleby, and have an opportunity of relieving their minds by assuring them that any trifling service we have been able to do them is a great deal more than repaid by the zeal and ardour you display. —Not a word, my dear Sir, I beg. To-morrow is Sunday. I shall make bold to come out at tea-time, and take the chance of finding you at home; if you are not, you know, or the ladies should feel a delicacy in being intruded on, and would rather not be known to me just now, why I can come again another time, any other time would do for me. Let it remain upon that understanding. Brother Ned, my dear fellow, let me have a word with you this way."

The twins went out of the office arm in arm, and Nicholas, who saw in this act of kindness, and many others of which he had been the subject that morning, only so many delicate renewals on the arrival of their nephew of the kind assurances which the brothers had given him in his absence, could scarcely feel sufficient admiration and gratitude for such extraordinary consideration.

The intelligence that they were to have a visitor—and such a visitor—next day, awakened in the breast of Mrs. Nickleby mingled feelings of exultation and regret; for whereas on the one hand she hailed it as an omen of her speedy restoration to good society and the almost-forgotten pleasures of morning calls and evening tea-drinkings, she could not, on the other, but reflect with bitterness of spirit on the absence of a silver teapot with an ivory knob on the lid, and a milk-jug to match, which had been the pride of

her heart in days of yore, and had been kept from year's end to year's end wrapped up in wash-leather on a certain top shelf which now presented itself in lively colours to her sorrowing imagination.

"I wonder who's got that spice-box," said Mrs. Nickleby, shaking her head. "It used to stand in the left-hand corner, next but two to the pickled onions. You remember that spice-box, Kate?"

"Perfectly well, mama."

"I shouldn't think you did, Kate," returned Mrs. Nickleby, in a severe manner, "talking about it in that cold and unfeeling way! If there is any one thing that vexes me in these losses more than the losses themselves, I do protest and declare," said Mrs. Nickleby, rubbing her nose with an impassioned air, "that it is to have people about me who take things with such provoking calmness."

"My dear mama," said Kate, stealing her arm round her mother's neck, "why do you say what I know you cannot seriously mean or think, or why be angry with me for being happy and content? You and Nicholas are left to me, we are together once again, and what regard can I have for a few trifling things of which we never feel the want? When I have seen all the misery and desolation that death can bring, and known the lonesome feeling of being solitary and alone in crowds, and all the agony of separation in grief and poverty when we most needed comfort and support from each other, can you wonder that I look upon this as a place of such delicious quiet and rest, that with you beside me I have nothing to wish for or regret? There was a time, and not long since, when all the comforts of our old home did come back upon me, I own, very often—oftener than you would think perhaps—but I affected to care nothing for them, in the hope that you would so be brought to regret them less. I was not insensible, indeed. I might have felt happier if I had been. Dear mama," said Kate, in great agitation, "I know no difference between this home and that in which we were all so happy for so many years, except that the kindest and gentlest heart that ever ached on earth has passed in peace to heaven."

"Kate my dear, Kate!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, folding her in her arms.

"I have so often thought," sobbed Kate, "of all his kind

words—of the last time he looked into my little room, as he passed up-stairs to bed, and said 'God bless you, darling.' There was a paleness in his face, mama—the broken heart—I know it was—I little thought so—then—"

A gush of tears came to her relief, and Kate laid her head upon her mother's breast, and wept like a little child.

It is an exquisite and beautiful thing in our nature, that when the heart is touched and softened by some tranquil happiness or affectionate feeling, the memory of the dead comes over it most powerfully and irresistibly. It would almost seem as though our better thoughts and sympathies were charms, in virtue of which the soul is enabled to hold some vague and mysterious intercourse with the spirits of those whom we dearly loved in life. Alas! how often and how long may those patient angels hover above us, watching for the spell which is so seldom uttered, and so soon forgotten!

Poor Mrs. Nickleby, accustomed to give ready utterance to whatever came uppermost in her mind, had never conceived the possibility of her daughter's dwelling upon these thoughts in secret, the more especially as no hard trial or querulous reproach had ever drawn them from her. But now, when the happiness of all that Nicholas had just told them, and of their new and peaceful life, brought these recollections so strongly upon Kate that she could not suppress them, Mrs. Nickleby began to have a glimmering that she had been rather thoughtless now and then, and was conscious of something like self-reproach as she embraced her daughter, and yielded to the emotions which such a conversation naturally awakened.

There was a mighty bustle that night, and a vast quantity of preparation for the expected visitor, and a very large nosegay was brought from a gardener's hard by and cut up into a number of very small ones with which Mrs. Nickleby would have garnished the little sitting-room, in a style that certainly could not have failed to attract anybody's attention, if Kate had not offered to spare her the trouble, and arranged them in the prettiest and neatest manner possible. If the cottage ever looked pretty, it must have been on such a bright and sunshiny day as the next day was. But Smike's pride in the garden, or Mrs. Nickleby's in the condition of the furniture, or Kate's in everything, was nothing to the pride with which Nicholas looked at Kate her-

self; and surely the costliest mansion in all England might have found in her beautiful face and graceful form its most exquisite and peerless ornament.

About six o'clock in the afternoon Mrs. Nickleby was thrown into a great flutter of spirits by the long expected knock at the door, nor was this flutter at all composed by the audible tread of two pair of boots in the passage, which Mrs. Nickleby augured in a breathless state must be "the two Mr. Cheerybles;" as it certainly was, though not the two Mrs. Nickleby expected, because it was Mr. Charles Cheeryble, and his nephew, Mr. Frank, who made a thousand apologies for his intrusion, which Mrs. Nickleby (having teaspoons enough and to spare for all) most graciously received. Nor did the appearance of this unexpected visitor occasion the least embarrassment (save in Kate, and that only to the extent of a blush or two at first), for the old gentleman was so kind and cordial, and the young gentleman imitated him in this respect so well, that the usual stiffness and formality of a first meeting showed no signs of appearing, and Kate really more than once detected herself in the very act of wondering when it was going to begin.

At the tea-table there was plenty of conversation on a great variety of subjects, nor were there wanting jocose matters of discussion, such as they were; for young Mr. Cheeryble's recent stay in Germany happening to be alluded to, old Mr. Cheeryble informed the company that the aforesaid young Mr. Cheeryble was suspected to have fallen deeply in love with the daughter of a certain German burgomaster. This accusation young Mr. Cheeryble most indignantly repelled, upon which Mrs. Nickleby slily remarked that she suspected, from the very warmth of the denial, there must be something in it. Young Mr. Cheeryble then earnestly entreated old Mr. Cheeryble to confess that it was all a jest, which old Mr. Cheeryble at last did, young Mr. Cheeryble being so much in earnest about it, that—as Mrs. Nickleby said many thousand times afterwards in recalling the scene—he "quite coloured," which she rightly considered a memorable circumstance, and one worthy of remark, young men not being as a class remarkable for modesty or self-denial, especially when there is a lady in the case, when, if they colour at all, it is rather their practice to colour the story, and not themselves.

After tea there was a walk in the garden, and the even-

ing being very fine they strolled out at the garden gate into some lanes and bye-roads, and sauntered up and down until it grew quite dark. The time seemed to pass very quickly with all the party. Kate went first, leaning upon her brother's arm, and talking with him and Mr. Frank Cheeryble; and Mrs. Nickleby and the elder gentleman followed at a short distance, the kindness of the good merchant, his interest in the welfare of Nicholas, and his admiration of Kate, so operating upon the good lady's feelings, that the usual current of her speech was confined within very narrow and circumscribed limits. Smike (who, if he had ever been an object of interest in his life, had been one that day) accompanied them, joining sometimes one group and sometimes the other, as brother Charles, laying his hand upon his shoulder, bade him walk with him, or Nicholas, looking smilingly round, beckoned him to come and talk with the old friend who understood him best, and who could win a smile into his care-worn face when none else could.

Pride is one of the seven deadly sins; but it cannot be the pride of a mother in her children, for that is a compound of two cardinal virtues—faith and hope. This was the pride which swelled Mrs. Nickleby's heart that night, and this it was which left upon her face, glistening in the light when they returned home, traces of the most grateful tears she had ever shed.

There was a quiet mirth about the little supper, which harmonized exactly with this tone of feeling, and at length the two gentlemen took their leave. There was one circumstance in the leave-taking which occasioned a vast deal of smiling and pleasantry, and that was, that Mr. Frank Cheeryble offered his hand to Kate twice over, quite forgetting that he had bade her adieu already. This was held by the elder Mr. Cheeryble to be a convincing proof that he was thinking of his German flame, and the jest occasioned immense laughter. So easy is it to move light hearts.

In short, it was a day of serene and tranquil happiness; and as we all have some bright day—many of us, let us hope, among a crowd of others—to which we revert with particular delight, so this one was often looked back to afterwards, as holding a conspicuous place in the calendar of those who shared in it.

Was there one exception, and that one he who needed to have been most happy?

Who was that who, in the silence of his own chamber, sank upon his knees to pray as his first friend had taught him, and folding his hands and stretching them wildly in the air, fell upon his face in a passion of bitter grief?

CHAPTER XLIV.

MR. RALPH NICKLEBY CUTS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE. IT WOULD ALSO APPEAR FROM THE CONTENTS HEREOF, THAT A JOKE, EVEN BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE, MAY BE SOMETIMES CARRIED TOO FAR.

THERE are some men who, living with the one object of enriching themselves, no matter by what means, and being perfectly conscious of the baseness and rascality of the means which they will use every day towards this end, affect nevertheless—even to themselves—a high tone of moral rectitude, and shake their heads and sigh over the depravity of the world. Some of the craftiest scoundrels that ever walked this earth, or rather—for walking implies, at least, an erect position and the bearing of a man—that ever crawled and crept through life by its dirtiest and narrowest ways, will gravely jot down in diaries the events of every day, and keep a regular debtor and creditor account with Heaven, which shall always show a floating balance in their own favour. Whether this is a gratuitous (the only gratuitous) part of the falsehood and trickery of such men's lives, or whether they really hope to cheat Heaven itself, and lay up treasure in the next world by the same process which has enabled them to lay up treasure in this—not to question how it is, so it is. And, doubtless, such book-keeping (like certain autobiographies which have enlightened the world) cannot fail to prove serviceable, in the one respect of sparing the Recording Angel some time and labour.

Ralph Nickleby was not a man of this stamp. Stern, unyielding, dogged, and impenetrable, Ralph cared for nothing in life, or beyond it, save the gratification of two passions, avarice, the first and predominant appetite of his

nature, and hatred, the second. Affecting to consider himself but a type of all humanity, he was at little pains to conceal his true character from the world in general, and in his own heart he exulted over and cherished every bad design as it had birth. The only scriptural admonition that Ralph Nickleby heeded, in the letter, was "know thyself." He knew himself well, and choosing to imagine that all mankind were cast in the same mould, hated them; for, though no man hates himself, the coldest among us having too much self-love for that, yet most men unconsciously judge the world from themselves, and it will be very generally found that those who sneer habitually at human nature, and affect to despise it, are among its worst and least pleasant samples.

But the present business of these adventures is with Ralph himself, who stood regarding Newman Noggs with a heavy frown, while that worthy took off his fingerless gloves, and, spreading them carefully on the palm of his left hand, and flattening them with his right to take the creases out, proceeded to roll them up with an absent air as if he were utterly regardless of all things else, in the deep interest of the ceremonial.

"Gone out of town!" said Ralph, slowly. "A mistake of yours. Go back again."

"No mistake," returned Newman. "Not even going;—gone."

"Has he turned girl or baby?" muttered Ralph, with a fretful gesture.

"I don't know," said Newman, "but he's gone."

The repetition of the word "gone," seemed to afford Newman Noggs inexpressible delight, in proportion as it annoyed Ralph Nickleby. He uttered the word with a full round emphasis, dwelling upon it as long as he decently could, and when he could hold out no longer without attracting observation, stood gasping it to himself, as if even that were a satisfaction.

"And *where* has he gone?" said Ralph.

"France," replied Newman. "Danger of another attack of erysipelas—a worse attack—in the head. So the doctors ordered him off. And he's gone."

"And Lord Frederick——?" began Ralph.

"He's gone too," replied Newman.

"And he carries his drubbing with him, does he!" said

Ralph, turning away—"pockets his bruises, and sneaks off without the retaliation of a word, or seeking the smallest reparation!"

"He's too ill," said Newman.

"Too ill?" repeated Ralph. "Why *I* would have it if I were dying; in that case I should only be the more determined to have it, and that without delay—I mean if I were he. But he's too ill! Poor Sir Mulberry! Too ill!"

Uttering these words with supreme contempt and great irritation of manner, Ralph signed hastily to Newman to leave the room; and throwing himself into his chair, beat his foot impatiently on the ground.

"There is some spell about that boy," said Ralph, grinding his teeth. "Circumstances conspire to help him. Talk of fortune's favours! What is even money to such Devil's luck as this!"

He thrust his hands impatiently into his pockets, but notwithstanding his previous reflections there was some consolation there, for his face relaxed a little; and although there was still a deep frown upon the contracted brow, it was one of calculation, and not of disappointment.

"This Hawk will come back, however," muttered Ralph; "and if I know the man—and I should by this time—his wrath will have lost nothing of its violence in the meanwhile. Obliged to live in retirement—the monotony of a sick-room to a man of his habits—no life—no drink—no play—nothing that he likes and lives by. He is not likely to forget his obligations to the cause of all this. Few men would; but he of all others—no, no!"

He smiled and shook his head, and resting his chin upon his hand, fell a musing, and smiled again. After a time he rose and rang the bell.

"That Mr. Squeers; has he been here?" said Ralph.

"He was here last night. I left him here when I went home," returned Newman.

"I know that, fool, do I not?" said Ralph, irascibly. "Has he been here since? Was he here this morning?"

"No," bawled Newman, in a very loud key.

"If he comes while I am out—he is pretty sure to be here by nine to-night, let him wait. And if there's another man with him, as there will be—perhaps," said Ralph, checking himself, "let him wait too."

"Let 'em both wait?" said Newman.

"Ay," replied Ralph, turning upon him with an angry look. "Help me on with this spencer, and don't repeat after me, like a croaking parrot."

"I wish I was a parrot," said Newman, sulkily.

"I wish you were," rejoined Ralph, drawing his spencer on; "I'd have wrung your neck long ago."

Newman returned no answer to this compliment, but looked over Ralph's shoulder for an instant (he was adjusting his collar of the spencer behind, just then), as if he were strongly disposed to tweak him by the nose. Meeting Ralph's eye, however, he suddenly recalled his wandering fingers, and rubbed his own red nose with a vehemence quite astonishing.

Bestowing no further notice upon his eccentric follower than a threatening look, and an admonition to be careful and make no mistake, Ralph took his hat and gloves, and walked out.

He appeared to have a very extraordinary and miscellaneous connexion, and very odd calls he made—some at great rich houses, and some at small poor ones—but all upon one subject: money. His face was a talisman to the porters and servants of his more dashing clients, and procured him ready admission, though he trudged on foot, and others, who were denied, rattled to the door in carriages. Here he was all softness and cringing civility; his step so light, that it scarcely produced a sound upon the thick carpets; his voice so soft, that it was not audible beyond the person to whom it was addressed. But in the poorer habitations Ralph was another man; his boots creaked upon the passage floor as he walked boldly in; his voice was harsh and loud as he demanded the money that was overdue; his threats were coarse and angry. With another class of customers, Ralph was again another man. These were attorneys of more than doubtful reputation, who helped him to new business, or raised fresh profits upon old. With them Ralph was familiar and jocose — humorous upon the topics of the day, and especially pleasant upon bankruptcies and pecuniary difficulties that made good for trade. In short, it would have been difficult to have recognised the same man under these various aspects, but for the bulky leather case full of bills and notes which he drew from his pocket at every house, and the constant repetition

of the same complaint (varied only in tone and style of delivery), that the world thought him rich, and that perhaps he might be if he had his own; but there was no getting money in when it was once out, either principal or interest, and it was a hard matter to live—even to live from day to day.

It was evening before a long round of such visits (interrupted only by a scanty dinner at an eating-house) terminated at Pimlico, and Ralph walked along St. James's Park, on his way home.

There were some deep schemes in his head, as the puckered brow and firmly-set mouth would have abundantly testified, even if they had been unaccompanied by a complete indifference to, or unconsciousness of, the objects about him. So complete was his abstraction, however, that Ralph, usually as quick-sighted as any man, did not observe that he was followed by a shambling figure, which at one time stole behind him with noiseless footsteps, at another crept a few paces before him, and at another glided along by his side; at all times regarding him with an eye so keen, and a look so eager and attentive, that it was more like the expression of an intrusive face in some powerful picture or strongly marked dream, than the scrutiny even of a most interested and anxious observer.

The sky had been lowering and dark for some time, and the commencement of a violent storm of rain drove Ralph for shelter to a tree. He was leaning against it with folded arms, still buried in thought, when, happening to raise his eyes, he suddenly met those of a man who, creeping round the trunk, peered into his face with a searching look. There was something in the usurer's expression at the moment, which the man appeared to remember well, for it decided him; and stepping close up to Ralph, he pronounced his name.

Astonished for the moment, Ralph fell back a couple of paces and surveyed him from head to foot. A spare, dark, withered man, of about his own age, with a stooping body, and a very sinister face rendered more ill-favoured by hollow and hungry cheeks deeply sunburnt, and thick black eyebrows, blacker in contrast with the perfect whiteness of his hair; roughly clothed in shabby garments, of a strange and uncouth make; and having about him an indefinable manner of depression and degradation—this, for a moment,

was all he saw. But he looked again, and the face and person seemed gradually to grow less strange, to change as he looked, to subside and soften into lineaments that were familiar, until at last they resolved themselves, as if by some strange optical illusion, into those of one whom he had known for many years, and forgotten and lost sight of for nearly as many more.

The man saw that the recognition was mutual, and beckoning to Ralph to take his former place under the tree, and not to stand in the falling rain—of which, in his first surprise, he had been quite regardless—addressed him in a hoarse faint tone.

"You would hardly have known me from my voice, I suppose, Mr. Nickleby?" he said.

"No," returned Ralph, bending a severe look upon him. "Though there is something in that, that I remember now."

"There is little in me that you can call to mind as having been there eight years ago, I dare say?" observed the other.

"Quite enough," said Ralph, carelessly, and averting his face. "More than enough."

"If I had remained in doubt about *you*, Mr. Nickleby," said the other, "this reception, and *your* manner, would have decided me very soon."

"Did you expect any other?" asked Ralph sharply.

"No!" said the man.

"You were right," retorted Ralph; "and as you feel no surprise, need express none."

"Mr. Nickleby," said the man, bluntly, after a brief pause, during which he had seemed to struggle with an inclination to answer him by some reproach, "will you hear a few words that I have to say?"

"I am obliged to wait here till the rain holds a little," said Ralph, looking abroad. "If you talk, Sir, I shall not put my fingers in my ears, though your talking may have as much effect as if I did."

"I was once in your confidence—," thus his companion began. Ralph looked round, and smiled involuntarily.

"Well," said the other, "as much in your confidence as you ever chose to let anybody be."

"Ah!" rejoined Ralph, folding his arms; "that's another thing—quite another thing."

"Don't let us play upon words, Mr. Nickleby, in the name of humanity."

"Of what?" said Ralph.

"Of humanity," replied the other, sternly. "I am hungry and in want. If the change that you must see in me after so long an absence—must see, for I, upon whom it has come by slow and hard degrees, see it and know it well—will not move you to pity, let the knowledge that bread; not the daily bread of the Lord's Prayer, which, as it is offered up in cities like this, is understood to include half the luxuries of the world for the rich, and just as much coarse food as will support life for the poor—not that, but bread, a crust of dry hard bread, is beyond my reach to-day—let that have some weight with you, if nothing else has."

"If this is the usual form in which you beg, Sir," said Ralph, "you have studied your part well; but if you will take advice from one who knows something of the world and its ways, I should recommend a lower tone—a little lower tone, or you stand a fair chance of being starved in good earnest."

As he said this, Ralph clenched his left wrist tightly with his right hand, and inclining his head a little on one side and dropping his chin upon his breast, looked at him whom he addressed with a frowning, sullen face: the very picture of a man whom nothing could move or soften.

"Yesterday was my first day in London," said the old man, glancing at his travel-stained dress and worn shoes.

"It would have been better for you, I think, if it had been your last also," replied Ralph.

"I have been seeking you these two days, where I thought you were most likely to be found," resumed the other more humbly, "and I met you here at last, when I had almost given up the hope of encountering you, Mr. Nickleby."

He seemed to wait for some reply, but Ralph giving him none, he continued—

"I am a most miserable and wretched outcast, nearly sixty years old, and as destitute and helpless as a child of six."

"I am sixty years old, too," replied Ralph, "and am neither destitute nor helpless. Work. Don't make fine play-acting speeches about bread, but earn it."

"How?" cried the other. "Where? Show me the means. Will you give them to me—will you?"

"I did once," replied Ralph, composedly, "you scarcely need ask me whether I will again."

"It's twenty years ago, or more," said the man, in a suppressed voice, "since you and I fell out. You remember that? I claimed a share in the profits of some business I brought to you, and, as I persisted, you arrested me for an old advance of ten pounds, odd shillings—including interest at fifty per cent or so."

"I remember something of it," replied Ralph, carelessly. "What then?"

"That didn't part us," said the man. "I made submission, being on the wrong side of the bolts and bars; and as you were not the made man then that you are now, you were glad enough to take back a clerk who wasn't over nice, and who knew something of the trade you drove."

"You begged and prayed, and I consented," returned Ralph. "That was kind of me. Perhaps I did want you—I forget. I should think I did, or you would have begged in vain. You were useful—not too honest, not too delicate, not too nice of hand or heart—but useful."

"Useful, indeed!" said the man. "Come. You had pinched and ground me down for some years before that, but I had served you faithfully up to that time, in spite of all your dog's usage—had I?"

Ralph made no reply.

"Had I?" said the man again.

"You had had your wages," rejoined Ralph, "and had done your work. We stood on equal ground so far, and could both cry quits."

"Then, but not afterwards," said the other.

"Not afterwards, certainly, nor even then, for (as you have just said) you owed me money, and do still," replied Ralph.

"That's not all," replied the man eagerly. "That's not all. Mark that. I didn't forget that old score, trust me. Partly in remembrance of that, and partly in the hope of making money some day by the scheme, I took advantage of my position about you, and possessed myself of a hold upon you, which you would give half of all you have, to know, and never can know but through me. I left you—long after that time, remember—and, for some poor trick-

ery that came within the law, but was nothing to what you money makers daily practice just outside its bounds, was sent away a convict for seven years. I have returned what you see me. Now, Mr. Nickleby," said the man, with a strange mixture of humility and sense of power, "what help and assistance will you give me—what bribe, to speak out plainly? My expectations are not monstrous, but I must live, and to live I must eat and drink. Money is on your side, and hunger and thirst on mine. You may drive an easy bargain."

"Is that all?" said Ralph, still eyeing his companion with the same steady look and moving nothing but his lips.

"It depends on you, Mr. Nickleby, whether that's all or not," was the rejoinder.

"Why then, harkye, Mr.——, I don't know by what name I am to call you," said Ralph.

"By my old one, if you like."

"Why, then, harkye, Mr. Brooker," said Ralph, in his harshest accents, "and don't expect to draw another speech from me—harkye, Sir. I know you of old for a ready scoundrel, but you never had a stout heart; and hard work, with (maybe) chains upon those legs of yours, and shorter food than when I 'pinched' and 'ground' you, has blunted your wits, or you would not come with such a tale as this to me. You a hold upon me! Keep it, or publish it to the world, if you like."

"I can't do that," interposed Brooker. "That wouldn't serve me."

"Wouldn't it?" said Ralph. "It will serve you as much as bringing it to me, I promise you. To be plain with you, I am a careful man, and know my affairs thoroughly. I know the world, and the world knows me. Whatever you gleaned, or heard, or saw, when you served me, the world knows and magnifies already. You could tell it nothing that would surprise it—unless, indeed, it redounded to my credit or honour, and then it would scout you for a liar. And yet I don't find business slack, or clients scrupulous. Quite the contrary. I am reviled or threatened every day by one man or another," said Ralph; "but things roll on just the same, and I don't grow poorer either."

"I neither revile nor threaten," rejoined the man. "I

can tell you of what you have lost by my act, what I can only restore, and what, if I die without restoring, dies with me, and never can be regained."

"I tell my money pretty accurately, and generally keep it in my own custody," said Ralph. "I look sharply after most men that I deal with, and most of all I looked sharply after you. You are welcome to all you have kept from me."

"Are those of your own name dear to you?" said the man emphatically. "If they are——"

"They are not," returned Ralph, exasperated at this perseverance, and the thought of Nicholas, which the last question awakened. "They are not. If you had come as a common beggar, I might have thrown a sixpence to you in remembrance of the clever knave you used to be; but since you try to palm these stale tricks upon one you might have known better, I'll not part with a halfpenny—nor would I to save you from rotting. And remember this, 'scape-gallows," said Ralph, menacing him with his hand, "that if we meet again, and you so much as notice me by one begging gesture, you shall see the inside of a jail once more, and tighten this hold upon me in the intervals of the hard labour that vagabonds are put to. There's my answer to your trash. Take it."

With a disdainful scowl at the object of his anger, who met his eye but uttered not a word, Ralph walked away at his usual pace, without manifesting the slightest curiosity to see what became of his late companion, or indeed once looking behind him. The man remained on the same spot with his eyes fixed upon his retreating figure until it was lost to view, and then drawing his arms about his chest, as if the damp and lack of food struck coldly to him, lingered with slouching steps by the wayside, and begged of those who passed along.

Ralph, in no-wise moved by what had lately passed, further than as he had already expressed himself, walked deliberately on, and turning out of the Park and leaving Golden Square on his right, took his way through some streets at the West End of the town until he arrived in that particular one in which stood the residence of Madame Mantalini. The name of that lady no longer appeared on the flaming door-plate, that of Miss Knag being substituted in its stead; but the bonnets and dresses were still dimly

visible in the first-floor windows by the decaying light of a summer's evening, and, excepting this ostensible alteration in the proprietorship, the establishment wore its old appearance.

"Humph!" muttered Ralph, drawing his hand across his mouth with a connoisseur-like air, and surveying the house from top to bottom; "these people look pretty well. They can't last long; but if I know of their going, in good time, I am safe, and a fair profit too. I must keep them closely in view—that's all."

So, nodding his head very complacently, Ralph was leaving the spot, when his quick ear caught the sound of a confused noise and hubbub of voices, mingled with a great running up and down stairs in the very house which had been the subject of his scrutiny; and while he was hesitating whether to knock at the door or listen at the key-hole a little longer, a female servant of Madame Mantalini's (whom he had often seen) opened it abruptly and bounced out, with her blue cap-ribands streaming in the air.

"Hallo here. Stop!" cried Ralph. "What's the matter? Here am I. Didn't you hear me knock?"

"Oh! Mr. Nickleby, Sir," said the girl. "Go up, for the love of Gracious. Master's been and done it again."

"Done what?" said Ralph, tartly. "What d'ye mean?"

"I knew he would if he was drove to it," cried the girl. "I said so all along."

"Come here, you silly wench," said Ralph, catching her by the wrist; "and don't carry family matters to the neighbours, destroying the credit of the establishment. Come here; do you hear me, girl?"

Without any further expostulation, he led or rather pulled the frightened handmaid into the house, and shut the door; then bidding her walk up-stairs before him, followed without more ceremony.

Guided by the noise of a great many voices all talking together, and passing the girl in his impatience, before they had ascended many steps, Ralph quickly reached the private sitting-room, when he was rather amazed by the confused and inexplicable scene in which he suddenly found himself.

There were all the young-lady workers, some with bonnets and some without, in various attitudes expressive of alarm and consternation; some gathered round Madame

Mantalini, who was in tears upon one chair; and others round Miss Knag, who was in opposition tears upon another; and others round Mr. Mantalini, who was perhaps the most striking figure in the whole group, for Mr. Mantalini's legs were extended at full length upon the floor, and his head and shoulders were supported by a very tall footman, who didn't seem to know what to do with them, and Mr. Mantalini's eyes were closed, and his face was pale, and his hair was comparatively straight, and his whiskers and moustache were limp, and his teeth were clenched, and he had a little bottle in his right hand, and a little tea-spoon in his left, and his hands, arms, legs, and shoulders, were all stiff and powerless. And yet Madame Mantalini was not weeping upon the body, but was scolding violently upon her chair; and all this amidst a clamour of tongues, perfectly deafening, and which really appeared to have driven the unfortunate footman to the utmost verge of distraction.

"What is the matter here?" said Ralph, pressing forward.

At this inquiry, the clamour was increased twenty-fold, and an astounding string of such shrill contradictions as "He's poisoned himself"—"He hasn't"—"Send for a doctor"—"Don't"—"He's dying"—"He isn't, he's only pretending"—with various other cries, poured forth with bewildering volubility, until Madame Mantalini was seen to address herself to Ralph, when female curiosity to know what she would say, prevailed, and, as if by general consent, a dead silence, unbroken by a single whisper, instantaneously succeeded.

"Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini; "by what chance you came here, I don't know."

Here a gurgling voice was heard to ejaculate, as part of the wanderings of a sick man, the words "Demnition sweetness!" But nobody heeded them except the footman, who, being startled to hear such awful tones proceeding, as it were, from between his very fingers, dropped his master's head upon the floor with a pretty loud crash, and then, without an effort to lift him up, gazed upon the bystanders, as if he had done something rather clever than otherwise.

"I will, however," continued Madame Mantalini, drying her eyes, and speaking with great indignation, "say before you, and before everybody here, for the first time, and once for all, that I never will supply that man's extravagances

and viciousness again. I have been a dupe and a fool to him long enough. In future, he shall support himself if he can, and then he may spend what money he pleases, upon whom and how he pleases; but it shall not be mine, and therefore you had better pause before you trust him further."

Thereupon Madame Mantalini, quite unmoved by some most pathetic lamentations on the part of her husband, that the apothecary had not mixed the prussic acid strong enough, and that he must take another bottle or two to finish the work he had in hand, entered into a catalogue of that amiable gentleman's gallantries, deceptions, extravagances, and infidelities (especially the last), winding up with a protest against being supposed to entertain the smallest remnant of regard for him; and adducing, in proof of the altered state of her affections, the circumstance of his having poisoned himself in private no less than six times within the last fortnight, and her not having once interfered by word or deed to save his life.

"And I insist on being separated and left to myself," said Madame Mantalini, sobbing. "If he dares to refuse me a separation, I'll have one in law—I can—and I hope this will be a warning to all girls who have seen this disgraceful exhibition."

Miss Knag, who was unquestionably the oldest girl in the company, said with great solemnity, that it would be a warning to *her*, and so did the young ladies generally, with the exception of one or two who appeared to entertain some doubts whether such whiskers could do wrong.

"Why do you say all this before so many listeners?" said Ralph, in a low voice. "You know you are not in earnest."

"I *am* in earnest," replied Madame Mantalini, aloud, and retreating towards Miss Knag.

"Well, but consider," reasoned Ralph, who had a great interest in the matter. "It would be well to reflect. A married woman has no property."

"Not a solitary single individual dem, my soul," said Mr. Mantalini, raising himself upon his elbow.

"I am quite aware of that," retorted Madame Mantalini, tossing her head; "and *I* have none. The business, the stock, this house, and everything in it, all belong to Miss Knag."

"That's quite true, Madame Mantalini," said Miss Knag, with whom her late employer had secretly come to an amicable understanding on this point. "Very true, indeed, Madame Mantalini—hem—very true. And I never was more glad in all my life, that I had strength of mind to resist matrimonial offers, no matter how advantageous, than I am when I think of my present position as compared with your most unfortunate and most undeserved one, Madame Mantalini."

"Demmit!" cried Mr. Mantalini, turning his head towards his wife. "Will it not slap and pinch the envious dowager, that dares to reflect upon its own delicious?"

But the day of Mr. Mantalini's blandishments had departed. "Miss Knag, Sir," said his wife, "is my particular friend;" and although Mr. Mantalini leered till his eyes seemed in danger of never coming back to their right places again, Madame Mantalini showed no signs of softening.

To do the excellent Miss Knag justice, she had been mainly instrumental in bringing about this altered state of things, for, finding by daily experience, that there was no chance of the business thriving, or even continuing to exist, while Mr. Mantalini had any hand in the expenditure, and having now a considerable interest in its well-doing, she had sedulously applied herself to the investigation of some little matters connected with that gentleman's private character, which she had so well elucidated, and artfully imparted to Madame Mantalini, as to open her eyes more effectually than the closest and most philosophical reasoning could have done in a series of years. To which end, the accidental discovery by Miss Knag of some tender correspondence, in which Madame Mantalini was described as "old" and "ordinary," had most providentially contributed.

However, notwithstanding her firmness, Madame Mantalini wept very piteously; and as she leant upon Miss Knag, and signed towards the door, that young lady and all the other young ladies, with sympathising faces, proceeded to bear her out.

"Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini, in tears, "you have been made a witness to this demnition cruelty, on the part of the demdest enslaver and captivator that never was, oh dem! I forgive that woman."

"Forgive!" repeated Madame Mantalini, angrily.

"I do forgive her, Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini. "You will blame me, the world will blame me, the women will blame me; everybody will laugh, and scoff, and smile, and grin most demnebly. They will say, 'She had a blessing. She did not know it. He was too weak; he was too good; he was a dem'd fine fellow, but he loved too strong; he could not bear her to be cross, and call him wicked names. It was a dem'd case, there never was a demder.' But I forgive her."

With this affecting speech Mr. Mantalini fell down again very flat, and lay to all appearance without sense or motion, until all the females had left the room, when he came cautiously into a sitting posture, and confronted Ralph with a very blank face, and the little bottle still in one hand and the tea-spoon in the other.

"You may put away those fooleries now, and live by your wits again," said Ralph, coolly putting on his hat.

"Demmit, Nickleby, you're not serious?"

"I seldom joke," said Ralph. "Good night."

"No, but Nickleby—" said Mantalini.

"I am wrong, perhaps," rejoined Ralph. "I hope so. You should know best. Good night."

Affecting not to hear his entreaties that he would stay and advise with him, Ralph left the crest-fallen Mr. Mantalini to his meditations, and left the house quietly.

"Oho!" he said. "Sets the wind that way so soon? Half knave and half fool, and detected in both characters —hum—I think your day is over, Sir."

As he said this, he made some memorandum in his pocket-book in which Mr. Mantalini's name figured conspicuously, and finding by his watch that it was between nine and ten o'clock, made all speed home.

"Are they here?" was the first question he asked of Newman.

Newman nodded. "Been here half-an-hour."

"Two of them? One a fat sleek man?"

"Ay," said Newman. "In your room now."

"Good," rejoined Ralph. "Get me a coach."

"A coach! What you—going to—Eh?" stammered Newman.

Ralph angrily repeated his orders, and Noggs, who might well have been excused for wondering at such an unusual and extraordinary circumstance—for he had never seen

Ralph in a coach in his life—departed on his errand, and presently returned with the conveyance.

Into it went Mr. Squeers, and Ralph, and the third man, whom Newman Noggs had never seen. Newman stood upon the door-step to see them off, not troubling himself to wonder where or upon what business they were going, until he chanced by mere accident to hear Ralph name the address whither the coachman was to drive.

Quick as lightning and in a state of the most extreme wonder, Newman darted into his little office for his hat, and limped after the coach as if with the intention of getting up behind; but in this design he was balked, for it had too much the start of him and was soon hopelessly ahead, leaving him gaping in the empty street.

"I don't know though," said Noggs, stopping for breath, "any good that I could have done by going too. He would have seen me if I had. Drive *there!* What can come of this! If I had only known it yesterday I could have told —drive there! There's mischief in it. There must be."

His reflections were interrupted by a grey-haired man of a very remarkable, though far from prepossessing appearance, who, coming stealthily towards him, solicited relief.

Newman, still cogitating deeply, turned away; but the man followed him, and pressed him with such a tale of misery that Newman (who might have been considered a hopeless person to beg from, and who had little enough to give) looked into his hat for some halfpence which he usually kept screwed up, when he had any, in a corner of his pocket-handkerchief.

While he was busily untwisting the knot with his teeth, the man said something which attracted his attention; whatever that something was, it led to something else, and in the end he and Newman walked away side by side—the strange man talking earnestly, and Newman listening.

CHAPTER XLV.

CONTAINING MATTER OF A SURPRISING KIND.

"As we gang awa' fra' Lunnun to-morrow neeght, and as I dinnot know that I was e'er so happy in a' my days, Misther Nickleby, ding! but I *will* tak' anoother glass to our next merry meeting!"

So said John Browdie, rubbing his hands with great joyousness, and looking round him with a ruddy shining face, quite in keeping with the declaration.

The time at which John found himself in this enviable condition, was the same evening to which the last chapter bore reference; the place was the cottage; and the assembled company were Nicholas, Mrs. Nickleby, Mrs. Browdie, Kate Nickleby, and Smike.

A very merry party they had been. Mrs. Nickleby, knowing of her son's obligations to the honest Yorkshireman, had, after some demur, yielded her consent to Mr. and Mrs. Browdie being invited out to tea; in the way of which arrangement, there were at first sundry difficulties and obstacles, arising out of her not having had an opportunity of "calling" upon Mrs. Browdie first; for although Mrs. Nickleby very often observed with much complacency (as most punctilious people do), that she had not an atom of pride or formality about her, still she was a great stickler for dignity and ceremonies; and as it was manifest that, until a call had been made, she could not be (politely speaking, and according to the laws of society) even cognizant of the fact of Mrs. Browdie's existence, she felt her situation to be one of peculiar delicacy and difficulty.

"The call *must* originate with me, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, "that's indispensable. The fact is, my dear, that it's necessary there should be a sort of condescension on my part, and that I should show this young person that I am willing to take notice of her. There's a very respectable-looking young man," added Mrs. Nickleby, after a short consideration, "who is conductor to one of the omnibuses that go by here, and who wears a glazed hat—your sis-

ter and I have noticed him very often—he has a wart upon his nose, Kate, you know, exactly like a gentleman's servant."

"Have all gentlemen's servants warts upon their noses, mother?" asked Nicholas.

"Nicholas, my dear, how very absurd you are," returned his mother; "of course I mean that his glazed hat looks like a gentleman's servant, and not the wart upon his nose—though even that is not so ridiculous as it may seem to you, for we had a footboy once, who had not only a wart, but a wen also, and a very large wen too, and he demanded to have his wages raised in consequence, because he found it came very expensive. Let me see, what was I—oh yes, I know. The best way that I can think of, would be to send a card, and my compliments (I've no doubt he'd take 'em for a pot of porter), by this young man, to the Saracen with Two Necks—if the waiter took him for a gentleman's servant, so much the better. Then all Mrs. Browdie would have to do, would be to send her card back by the carrier (he could easily come with a double knock), and there's an end of it."

"My dear mother," said Nicholas, "I don't suppose such unsophisticated people as these ever had a card of their own, or ever will have."

"Oh that, indeed, Nicholas, my dear," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "that's another thing. If you put it upon that ground, why, of course, I have no more to say, than that I have no doubt they are very good sort of persons, and that I have no kind of objection to their coming here to tea if they like, and shall make a point of being very civil to them if they do."

The point being thus effectually set at rest, and Mrs. Nickleby duly placed in the patronising and mildly-condescending position which became her rank and matrimonial years, Mr. and Mrs. Browdie were invited and came; and as they were very deferential to Mrs. Nickleby, and seemed to have a becoming appreciation of her greatness, and were very much pleased with everything, the good lady had more than once given Kate to understand, in a whisper, that she thought they were the very best-meaning people she had ever seen, and perfectly well behaved.

And thus it came to pass, that John Browdie declared, in the parlour after supper, to wit, at twenty minutes be-

fore eleven o'clock, P.M., that he had never been so happy in all his days.

Nor was Mrs. Browdie much behind her husband in this respect, for that young matron—whose rustic beauty contrasted very prettily with the more delicate loveliness of Kate, and without suffering by the contrast either, for each served as it were to set off and decorate the other—could not sufficiently admire the gentle and winning manners of the young lady, or the engaging affability of the elder one. Then Kate had the art of turning the conversation to subjects upon which the country girl, bashful at first in strange company, could feel herself at home; and if Mrs. Nickleby was not quite so felicitous at times in the selection of topics of discourse, or if she did seem, as Mrs. Browdie expressed it, "rather high in her notions," still nothing could be kinder, and that she took considerable interest in the young couple was manifest from the very long lectures on housewifery with which she was so obliging as to entertain Mrs. Browdie's private ear, which were illustrated by various references to the domestic economy of the cottage, in which (those duties falling exclusively upon Kate) the good lady had about as much share, either in theory or practice, as any one of the statues of the Twelve Apostles which embellish the exterior of St. Paul's Cathedral.

"Mr. Browdie," said Kate, addressing his young wife, "is the best-humoured, the kindest and heartiest creature I ever saw. If I were oppressed with I don't know how many cares, it would make me happy only to look at him."

"He does seem indeed, upon my word, a most excellent creature, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby; "most excellent. And I am sure that at all times it will give me pleasure—really pleasure now—to have you, Mrs. Browdie, to see me in this plain and homely manner. We make no display," said Mrs. Nickleby, with an air which seemed to insinuate that they could make a vast deal if they were so disposed—"no fuss, no preparation; I wouldn't allow it. I said 'Kate, my dear, you will only make Mrs. Browdie feel uncomfortable, and how very foolish and inconsiderate that would be!"

"I am very much obliged to you, I am sure, ma'am," returned Mrs. Browdie, gratefully. "It's nearly eleven o'clock, John. I am afraid we are keeping you up very late, ma'am."

"Late!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with a sharp thin laugh,

and one little cough at the end, like a note of admiration expressed. "This is quite early for us. We used to keep such hours! Twelve, one, two, three o'clock was nothing to us. Balls, dinners, card-parties—never were such rakes as the people about where we used to live. I often think now, I am sure, that how we ever could go through with it is quite astonishing—and that is just the evil of having a large connexion and being a great deal sought after, which I would recommend all young married people steadily to resist; though of course, and it's perfectly clear, and a very happy thing too, *I* think, that very few young married people can be exposed to such temptations. There was one family in particular, that used to live about a mile from us—not straight down the road, but turning sharp off to the left by the turnpike where the Plymouth mail ran over the donkey—that were quite extraordinary people for giving the most extravagant parties, with artificial flowers and champagne, and variegated lamps, and, in short, every delicacy of eating and drinking that the most singular epicure could possibly require—I don't think there ever were such people as those Peltiroguses. You remember the Peltiroguses, Kate?"

Kate saw that for the ease and comfort of the visitors it was high time to stay this flood of recollection, so answered that she entertained of the Peltiroguses a most vivid and distinct remembrance; and then said that Mr. Browdie had half promised, early in the evening, that he would sing a Yorkshire song, and that she was most impatient that he should redeem his promise, because she was sure it would afford her mama more amusement and pleasure than it was possible to express.

Mrs. Nickleby confirming her daughter with the best possible grace—for there was patronage in that too, and a kind of implication that she had a discerning taste in such matters, and was something of a critic—John Browdie proceeded to consider the words of some north-country ditty, and to take his wife's recollection respecting the same. This done, he made divers ungainly movements in his chair, and singling out one particular fly on the ceiling from the other flies there asleep, fixed his eyes upon him, and began to roar a meek sentiment (supposed to be uttered by a gentle swain fast pining away with love and despair) in a voice of thunder.

At the end of the first verse, as though some person without had waited until then to make himself audible, was heard a loud and violent knocking at the street-door—so loud and so violent, indeed, that the ladies started as by one accord, and John Browdie stopped.

"It must be some mistake," said Nicholas, carelessly. "We know nobody who would come here at this hour."

Mrs. Nickleby surmised, however, that perhaps the counting-house was burnt down, or perhaps 'the Mr. Cheerybles' had sent to take Nicholas into partnership (which certainly appeared highly probable at that time of night), or perhaps Mr. Linkinwater had run away with the property, or perhaps Miss La Creevy was taken ill, or perhaps——

But a hasty exclamation from Kate stopped her abruptly in her conjectures, and Ralph Nickleby walked into the room.

"Stay," said Ralph, as Nicholas rose, and Kate, making her way towards him, threw herself upon his arm. "Before that boy says a word, hear me."

Nicholas bit his lip and shook his head in a threatening manner, but appeared for the moment unable to articulate a syllable. Kate clung closer to his arm, Smike retreated behind them, and John Browdie, who had heard of Ralph, and appeared to have no great difficulty in recognising him, stepped between the old man and his young friend, as if with the intention of preventing either of them from advancing a step further.

"Hear me, I say," said Ralph, "and not him."

"Say what thou'st gotten to say then, Sir," retorted John; "and tak' care thou dinnot put up angry bluid which thou'dst betther try to quiet."

"I should know *you*," said Ralph, "by your tongue; and *him*" (pointing to Smike) "by his looks."

"Don't speak to him," said Nicholas, recovering his voice. "I will not have it. I will not hear him. I do not know that man. I cannot breathe the air that he corrupts. His presence is an insult to my sister. It is shame to see him. I will not bear it, by——"

"Stand!" cried John, laying his heavy hand upon his chest.

"Then let him instantly retire," said Nicholas, struggling. "I am not going to lay hands upon him, but he shall with-

draw. I will not have him here. John—John Browdie—is this my house—am I a child? If he stands there," cried Nicholas, burning with fury, "looking so calmly upon those who know his black and dastardly heart, he'll drive me mad."

To all these exclamations John Browdie answered not a word, but he retained his hold upon Nicholas; and when he was silent again, spoke.

"There's more to say and hear than thou think'st for," said John. "I tell'ee I ha' gotten scent o' thot already. Wa'at be that shadow ootside door there? Noo schoolmeasther, show thyself, mun; dinnot be sheame-feaced. Noo, auld gen'l'man, let's have schoolmeasther, coom."

Hearing this adjuration, Mr. Squeers, who had been lingering in the passage until such time as it should be expedient for him to enter and he could appear with effect, was fain to present himself in a somewhat undignified and sneaking way; at which John Browdie laughed with such keen and heartfelt delight, that even Kate, in all the pain, anxiety, and surprise of the scene, and though the tears were in her eyes, felt a disposition to join him.

"Have you done enjoying yourself, Sir?" said Ralph, at length.

"Pratty nigh for the prasant time, Sir," replied John.

"I can wait," said Ralph. "Take your own time, pray."

Ralph waited until there was a perfect silence, and then turning to Mrs. Nickleby, but directing an eager glance at Kate, as if more anxious to watch his effect upon her, said:—

"Now, ma'am, listen to me. I don't imagine that you were a party to a very fine tirade of words sent me by that boy of yours, because I don't believe that under his control, you have the slightest will of your own, or that your advice, your opinion, your wants, your wishes—anything which in nature and reason (or of what use is your great experience?) ought to weigh with him—has the slightest influence or weight whatever, or is taken for a moment into account."

Mrs. Nickleby shook her head and sighed, as if there were a good deal in that, certainly.

"For this reason," resumed Ralph, "I address myself to you, ma'am. For this reason, partly, and partly because I do not wish to be disgraced by the acts of a vicious strip-

ling whom *I* was obliged to disown, and who, afterwards, in his boyish majesty, feigns to—ha! ha!—to disown *me*, I present myself here to-night. I have another motive in coming—a motive of humanity. I come here," said Ralph, looking round with a biting and triumphant smile, and gloating and dwelling upon the words as if he were loath to lose the pleasure of saying them, "to restore a parent his child. Ay, Sir," he continued, bending eagerly forward, and addressing Nicholas, as he marked the change of his countenance, "to restore a parent his child—his son, Sir—trepanned, waylaid, and guarded at every turn by you, with the base design of robbing him some day of any little wretched pittance of which he might become possessed."

"In that, you know you lie," said Nicholas, proudly.

"In this, I know I speak the truth—I have his father here," retorted Ralph.

"Here!" sneered Squeers, stepping forward. "Do you hear that? Here! Didn't I tell you to be careful that his father didn't turn up, and send him back to me? Why, his father's my friend; he's to come back to me directly, he is. Now, what do you say—eh!—now—come—what do you say to that—an't you sorry you took so much trouble for nothing? an't you? an't you?"

"You bear upon your body certain marks I gave you," said Nicholas, looking quietly away, "and may talk in acknowledgment of them as much as you please. You'll talk a long time before you rub them out, Mr. Squeers."

The estimable gentleman last named, cast a hasty look at the table, as if he were prompted by this retort to throw a jug or bottle at the head of Nicholas, but he was interrupted in this design (if such design he had) by Ralph, who, touching him on the elbow, bade him tell the father that he might now appear and claim his son.

This being purely a labour of love, Mr. Squeers readily complied, and leaving the room for the purpose, almost immediately returned, supporting a sleek personage with an oily face, who, bursting from him, and giving to view the form and face of Mr. Snawley, made straight up to Smike, and tucking that poor fellow's head under his arm in a most uncouth and awkward embrace, elevated his broad-brimmed hat at arm's length in the air as a token of devout thanksgiving, exclaiming meanwhile, "How little

did I think of this here joyful meeting, when I saw him last! Oh, how little did I think it!"

"Be composed, Sir," said Ralph, with a gruff expression of sympathy, "you have got him now."

"Got him! Oh, haven't I got him! Have I got him, though?" cried Mr. Snawley, scarcely able to believe it. "Yes, here he is, flesh and blood, flesh and blood."

"Vary little flesh," said John Browdie.

Mr. Snawley was too much occupied by his parental feelings to notice this remark; and, to assure himself more completely of the restoration of his child, tucked his head under his arm again, and kept it there.

"What was it," said Snawley, "that made me take such a strong interest in him, when that worthy instructor of youth brought him to my house? What was it that made me burn all over with a wish to chastise him severely for cutting away from his best friends—his pastors and masters?"

"It was parental instinct, Sir," observed Squeers.

"That's what it was, Sir," rejoined Snawley; "the elevated feeling—the feeling of the ancient Romans and Grecians, and of the beasts of the field and birds of the air, with the exception of rabbits and tom-cats, which sometimes devour their offspring. My heart yearned towards him. I could have—I don't know what I couldn't have done to him in the anger of a father."

"It only shows what Natur is, Sir," said Mr. Squeers. "She's a rum 'un, is Natur."

"She is a holy thing, Sir," remarked Snawley.

"I believe you," added Mr. Squeers, with a moral sigh. "I should like to know how we should ever get on without her. Natur," said Mr. Squeers, solemnly, "is more easier conceived than described. Oh what a blessed thing, Sir, to be in a state of natur!"

Pending this philosophical discourse, the bystanders had been quite stupified with amazement, while Nicholas had looked keenly from Snawley to Squeers, and from Squeers to Ralph, divided between his feelings of disgust, doubt, and surprise. At this juncture, Smike escaping from his father fled to Nicholas, and implored him, in most moving terms, never to give him up, but to let him live and die beside him.

"If you are this boy's father," said Nicholas, "look at

the wreck he is, and tell me that you purpose to send him back to that loathsome den from which I brought him."

"Scandal again!" cried Squeers. "Recollect, you an't worth powder and shot, but I'll be even with you one way or another."

"Stop," interposed Ralph, as Snawley was about to speak. "Let us cut this matter short, and not bandy words here with hare-brained profligates. This is your son, as you can prove—and you, Mr. Squeers, you know this boy to be the same that was with you for so many years under the name of Smike—Do you?"

"Do I!" returned Squeers. "Don't I?"

"Good," said Ralph; "a very few words will be sufficient here. You had a son by your first wife, Mr. Snawley?"

"I had," replied that person, "and there he stands."

"We'll show that presently," said Ralph. "You and your wife were separated, and she had the boy to live with her, when he was a year old. You received a communication from her, when you had lived apart a year or two, that the boy was dead; and you believed it."

"Of course I did!" returned Snawley. "Oh the joy of——"

"Be rational, Sir, pray," said Ralph. "This is business, and transports interfere with it. This wife died a year and a half ago, or thereabouts—not more—in some obscure place, where she was housekeeper in a family. Is that the case?"

"That's the case," replied Snawley.

"Having written on her death-bed a letter or confession to you, about this very boy, which, as it was not directed otherwise than in your name, only reached you, and that by a circuitous course, a few days since?"

"Just so," said Snawley. "Correct in every particular, Sir."

"And this confession," resumed Ralph, "is to the effect that his death was an invention of hers to wound you—was a part of a system of annoyance, in short, which you seem to have adopted towards each other—that the boy lived, but was of weak and imperfect intellect—that she sent him by a trusty hand to a cheap school in Yorkshire—that she had paid for his education for some years, and then, being poor,

and going a long way off, gradually deserted him, for which she prayed forgiveness?"

Snawley nodded his head, and wiped his eyes; the first slightly, the last violently.

"The school was Mr. Squeers's," continued Ralph; "the boy was left there in the name of Smike; every description was fully given, dates tally exactly with Mr. Squeers's books, Mr. Squeers is lodging with you at this time; you have two other boys at his school: you communicated the whole discovery to him, he brought you to me as the person who had recommended to him the kidnapper of his child; and I brought you here. Is that so?"

"You talk like a good book, Sir, that's got nothing in its inside but what's the truth," replied Snawley.

"This is your pocket-book," said Ralph, producing one from his coat; "the certificates of your first marriage and of the boy's birth, and your wife's two letters, and every other paper that can support these statements directly or by implication, are here, are they?"

"Every one of 'em, Sir."

"And you don't object to their being looked at here, so that these people may be convinced of your power to substantiate your claim at once in law and reason, and you may resume your control over your own son without more delay. Do I understand you?"

"I couldn't have understood myself better, Sir."

"There, then," said Ralph, tossing the pocket-book upon the table. "Let them see them if they like; and as those are the original papers, I should recommend you to stand near while they are being examined, or you may chance to lose some."

With these words Ralph sat down unbidden, and compressing his lips, which were for the moment slightly parted by a smile, folded his arms, and looked for the first time at his nephew.

Nicholas, stung by the concluding taunt, darted an indignant glance at him; but commanding himself as well as he could, entered upon a close examination of the documents, at which John Browdie assisted. There was nothing about them which could be called in question. The certificates were regularly signed as extracts from the parish books, the first letter had a genuine appearance of having been written and preserved for some years, the handwriting

of the second tallied with it exactly (making proper allowance for its having been written by a person in extremity), and there were several other corroboratory scraps of entries and memoranda which it was equally difficult to question.

"Dear Nicholas," whispered Kate, who had been looking anxiously over his shoulder, "can this be really the case? Is this statement true?"

"I fear it is," answered Nicholas. "What say you, John?"

John scratched his head and shook it, but said nothing at all.

"You will observe, ma'am," said Ralph, addressing himself to Mrs. Nickleby, "that this boy being a minor and not of strong mind, we might have come here to-night, armed with the powers of the law, and backed by a troop of its myrmidons. I should have done so, ma'am, unquestionably, but for my regard for the feelings of yourself—and your daughter."

"You have shown your regard for *her* feelings well," said Nicholas, drawing his sister towards him.

"Thank you," replied Ralph. "Your praise, Sir, is commendation indeed."

"Well," said Squeers, "what's to be done? Them hackney-coach horses will catch cold if we don't think of moving; there's one of 'em a sneezing now, so that he blows the street door right open. What's the order of the day—eh? Is Master Snawley to come along with us?"

"No, no, no," replied Smike, drawing back, and clinging to Nicholas. "No. Pray, no. I will not go from you with him. No, no."

"This is a cruel thing," said Snawley, looking at his friends for support. "Do parents bring children into the world for this?"

"Do parents bring children into the world for *thot?*" said John Browdie bluntly, pointing, as he spoke, to Squeers.

"Never you mind," retorted that gentleman, tapping his nose derisively.

"Never I mind!" said John, "no, nor never nobody mind, say'st thou, schoolmeasther. It's nobody's minding that keeps sike men as thou afloat. Noo then, where be'st thou coomin' to? Dang it, dinnot coom treadin' ower me, mun."

Suiting the action to the word, John Browdie just

jerked his elbow into the chest of Mr. Squeers who was advancing upon Smike; with so much dexterity that the schoolmaster reeled and staggered back upon Ralph Nickleby, and being unable to recover his balance, knocked that gentleman off his chair, and stumbled heavily upon him.

This accidental circumstance was the signal for some very decisive proceedings. In the midst of a great noise, occasioned by the prayers and entreaties of Smike, the cries and exclamations of the women, and the vehemence of the men, demonstrations were made of carrying off the lost son by violence: and Squeers had actually begun to haul him out, when Nicholas (who, until then, had been evidently undecided how to act) took him by the collar, and shaking him so that such teeth as he had chattered in his head, politely escorted him to the room door, and thrusting him into the passage, shut it upon him.

"Now," said Nicholas, to the other two, "have the kindness to follow your friend."

"I want my son," said Snawley.

"Your son," replied Nicholas, "chooses for himself. He chooses to remain here, and he shall."

"You won't give him up?" said Snawley.

"I would not give him up against his will, to be the victim of such brutality as that to which you would consign him," replied Nicholas, "if he were a dog or a rat."

"Knock that Nickleby down with a candlestick," cried Mr. Squeers, through the keyhole, "and bring out my hat, somebody, will you, unless he wants to steal it."

"I am very sorry, indeed," said Mrs. Nickleby, who, with Mrs. Browdie, had stood crying and biting her fingers in a corner, while Kate—very pale, but perfectly quiet—had kept as near her brother as she could. "I am very sorry, indeed, for all this. I really don't know what would be best to do, and that's the truth. Nicholas ought to be the best judge, and I hope he is. Of course, it's a hard thing to have to keep other people's children, though young Mr. Snawley is certainly as useful and willing as it's possible for anybody to be; but, if it could be settled in any friendly manner—if old Mr. Snawley, for instance, would settle to pay something certain for his board and lodging, and some fair arrangement was come to, so that we undertook to have fish twice a-week, and a pudding twice, or a

dumpling, or something of that sort, I do think that it might be very satisfactory and pleasant for all parties."

This compromise, which was proposed with abundance of tears and sighs, not exactly meeting the point at issue, nobody took any notice of it; and poor Mrs. Nickleby accordingly proceeded to enlighten Mrs. Browdie upon the advantages of such a scheme, and the unhappy results flowing on all occasions, from her not being attended to when she proffered her advice.

"You, Sir," said Snawley, addressing the terrified Smike, "are an unnatural, ungrateful, unlovable boy. You won't let me love you when I want to. Won't you come home—won't you?"

"No, no, no," cried Smike, shrinking back.

"He never loved nobody," bawled Squeers, through the keyhole. "He never loved me; he never loved Wackford, who is next door but one to a cherubim. How can you expect that he'll love his father? He'll never love his father, he won't. He don't know what it is to have a father. He don't understand it. It an't in him."

Mr. Snawley looked steadfastly at his son for a full minute, and then covering his eyes with his hand, and once more raising his hat in the air, appeared deeply occupied in deploring his black ingratitude. Then drawing his arm across his eyes, he picked up Mr. Squeers's hat, and taking it under one arm, and his own under the other, walked slowly and sadly out.

"Your romance, Sir," said Ralph, lingering for a moment, "is destroyed, I take it. No unknown; no persecuted descendant of a man of high degree; but the weak, imbecile son of a poor, petty tradesman. We shall see how your sympathy melts before plain matter of fact."

"You shall," said Nicholas, motioning towards the door.

"And trust me, Sir," added Ralph, "that I never supposed you would give him up to-night. Pride, obstinacy, reputation for fine feeling, were all against it. These must be brought down, Sir, lowered, crushed, as they shall be soon. The protracted and wearing anxiety and expense of the law in its most oppressive form, its torture from hour to hour, its weary days and sleepless nights—with these I'll prove you, and break your haughty spirit, strong as you deem it now. And when you make this house a hell, and visit these trials upon yonder wretched object (as you will,

I know you), and those who think you now a young-fledged hero, we'll go into old accounts between us two, and see who stands the debtor, and comes out best at last—even before the world."

Ralph Nickleby withdrew. But Mr. Squeers, who had heard a portion of this closing address, and was by this time wound up to a pitch of impotent malignity almost unprecedented, could not refrain from returning to the parlour-door, and actually cutting some dozen capers with various wry faces and hideous grimaces, expressive of his triumphant confidence in the downfall and defeat of Nicholas.

Having concluded this war-dance, in which his short trousers and large boots had borne a very conspicuous figure, Mr. Squeers followed his friends, and the family were left to meditate upon recent occurrences.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THROWS SOME LIGHT UPON NICHOLAS'S LOVE; BUT WHETHER FOR GOOD OR EVIL THE READER MUST DETERMINE.

After an anxious consideration of the painful and embarrassing position in which he was placed, Nicholas decided that he ought to lose no time in frankly stating it to the kind brothers. Availing himself of the first opportunity of being alone with Mr. Charles Cheeryble at the close of next day, he accordingly related Smike's little history, and modestly but firmly expressed his hope that the good old gentleman would, under such circumstances as he described, hold him justified in adopting the extreme course of interfering between parent and child, and upholding the latter in his disobedience; even though his horror and dread of his father might seem, and would doubtless be represented as, a thing so repulsive and unnatural, as to render those who countenanced him in it, fit objects of general detestation and abhorrence.

"So deeply-rooted does this horror of the man appear to be," said Nicholas, "that I can hardly believe he really is

his son. Nature does not seem to have implanted in his breast one lingering feeling of affection for him, and surely she can never err."

"My dear Sir," replied brother Charles, "you fall into the very common mistake of charging upon Nature matters with which she has not the smallest connexion, and for which she is in no way responsible. Men talk of nature as an abstract thing, and lose sight of what is natural while they do so. Here is a poor lad who has never felt a parent's care, who has scarcely known anything all his life but suffering and sorrow, presented to a man who he is told is his father, and whose first act is to signify his intention of putting an end to his short term of happiness: of consigning him to his old fate, and taking him from the only friend he has ever had—which is yourself. If Nature, in such a case, put into that lad's breast but one secret prompting which urged him towards his father and away from you, she would be a liar and an idiot."

Nicholas was delighted to find that the old gentleman spoke so warmly, and in the hope that he might say something more to the same purpose made no reply.

"The same mistake presents itself to me, in one shape or other, at every turn," said brother Charles. "Parents who never showed their love, complain of want of natural affection in their children—children who never showed their duty, complain of want of natural feeling in their parents—law-makers who find both so miserable that their affections have never had enough of life's sun to develop them, are loud in their moralisings over parents and children too, and cry that the very ties of nature are disregarded. Natural affections and instincts, my dear Sir, are the most beautiful of the Almighty's works, but like other beautiful works of His, they must be reared and fostered, or it is as natural that they should be wholly obscured, and that new feelings should usurp their place, as it is that the sweetest productions of the earth, left untended, should be choked with weeds and briars. I wish we could be brought to consider this, and, remembering natural obligations a little more at the right time, talk about them a little less at the wrong one."

After this, brother Charles, who had talked himself into a great heat, stopped to cool a little, and then continued—

"I daresay you are surprised, my dear Sir, that I have

listened to your recital with so little astonishment. That is easily explained—your uncle has been here this morning."

Nicholas coloured, and drew back a step or two.

"Yes," said the old gentleman, tapping his desk emphatically, "here—in this room. He would listen neither to reason, feeling, nor justice. But Brother Ned was hard upon him—brother Ned, Sir, might have melted a paving-stone."

"He came to——" said Nicholas.

"To complain of you," returned brother Charles, "to poison our ears with calumnies and falsehoods; but he came on a fruitless errand, and went away with some wholesome truths in his ear besides. Brother Ned, my dear Mr. Nickleby—brother Ned, Sir, is a perfect lion. So is Tim Linkinwater—Tim is quite a lion. We had Tim in to face him at first, and Tim was at him, Sir, before you could say 'Jack Robinson.'"

"How can I ever thank you, for all the deep obligations you impose upon me every day?" said Nicholas.

"By keeping silence upon the subject, my dear Sir," returned brother Charles. "You shall be righted. At least you shall not be wronged. Nobody belonging to you shall be wronged. They shall not hurt a hair of your head, or the boy's head, or your mother's head, or your sister's head. I have said it, brother Ned has said it, Tim Linkinwater has said it. We have all said it, and we'll all do it. I have seen the father—if he is the father—and I suppose he must be. He is a barbarian and a hypocrite, Mr. Nickleby. I told him, 'You are a barbarian, Sir.' I did. I said, 'You're a barbarian, Sir.' And I'm glad of it—I am *very* glad I told him he was a barbarian—very glad, indeed!"

By this time brother Charles was in such a very warm state of indignation, that Nicholas thought he might venture to put in a word, but the moment he essayed to do so, Mr. Cheeryble laid his hand softly upon his arm, and pointed to a chair.

"The subject is at an end for the present," said the old gentleman, wiping his face. "Don't revive it by a single word. I am going to speak upon another subject—a confidential subject, Mr. Nickleby. We must be cool again, we must be cool."

After two or three turns across the room he resumed his seat, and drawing his chair nearer to that on which Nicholas was seated, said—

"I am about to employ you, my dear Sir, on a confidential and delicate mission."

"You might employ many a more able messenger, Sir," said Nicholas, "but a more trustworthy or zealous one, I may be bold to say, you could not find."

"Of that I am well assured," returned brother Charles, "well assured. You will give me credit for thinking so, when I tell you, that the object of this mission is a young lady."

"A young lady, Sir!" cried Nicholas, quite trembling for the moment with his eagerness to hear more.

"A very beautiful young lady," said Mr. Cheeryble, gravely.

"Pray go on, Sir," returned Nicholas.

"I am thinking how to do so," said brother Charles—sadly, as it seemed to his young friend, and with an expression allied to pain. "You accidentally saw a young lady in this room one morning, my dear Sir, in a fainting fit. Do you remember? Perhaps you have forgotten——"

"Oh no," replied Nicholas, hurriedly. "I—I—remember it very well indeed."

"*She* is the lady I speak of," said brother Charles. Like the famous parrot, Nicholas thought a great deal but was unable to utter a word.

"She is the daughter," said Mr. Cheeryble, "of a lady who, when she was a beautiful girl herself, and I was very many years younger, I—it seems a strange word for me to utter now—I loved very dearly. You will smile, perhaps, to hear a grey-headed man talk about such things: you will not offend me, for when I was as young as you, I dare say I should have done the same."

"I have no such inclination, indeed," said Nicholas.

"My dear brother Ned," continued Mr. Cheeryble, "was to have married her sister, but she died. She is dead too now, and has been for many years. She married—her choice; and I wish I could add that her after-life was as happy, as God knows I ever prayed it might be!"

A short silence intervened, which Nicholas made no effort to break.

"If trial and calamity had fallen as lightly on his head,

as in the deepest truth of my own heart I ever hoped (for her sake) it would, his life would have been one of peace and happiness," said the old gentleman, calmly. "It will be enough to say that this was not the case—that she was not happy—that they fell into complicated distresses and difficulties—that she came, twelve months before her death, to appeal to my old friendship; sadly changed, sadly altered, broken-spirited from suffering and ill-usage, and almost broken-hearted. He readily availed himself of the money which, to give her but one hour's peace of mind, I would have poured out as freely as water—nay, he often sent her back for more—and yet even while he squandered it, he made the very success of these, her applications to me, the groundwork of cruel taunts and jeers, protesting that he knew she thought with bitter remorse of the choice she had made, that she had married him from motives of interest and vanity (he was a gay young man with great friends about him when she chose him for her husband), and venting in short upon her, by every unjust and unkind means, the bitterness of that ruin and disappointment which had been brought about by his profligacy alone. In those times this young lady was a mere child. I never saw her again until that morning when you saw her also, but my nephew, Frank——"

Nicholas started, and indistinctly apologising for the interruption, begged his patron to proceed.

"—My nephew, Frank, I say," resumed Mr. Cheeryble, "encountered her by accident, and lost sight of her almost in a minute afterwards, within two days after he returned to England. Her father lay in some secret place to avoid his creditors, reduced, between sickness and poverty, to the verge of death, and she, a child,—we might almost think, if we did not know the wisdom of all Heaven's decrees—who should have blessed a better man, was steadily braving privation, degradation, and everything most terrible to such a young and delicate creature's heart, for the purpose of supporting him. She was attended, Sir," said brother Charles, "in these reverses, by one faithful creature, who had been, in old times, a poor kitchen wench in the family, who was then their solitary servant, but who might have been, for the truth and fidelity of her heart—who might have been—ah! the wife of Tim Linkinwater himself, Sir!"

Pursuing this encomium upon the poor follower with such energy and relish as no words can describe, brother Charles leant back in his chair, and delivered the remainder of his relation with greater composure.

It was in substance this: That proudly resisting all offers of permanent aid and support from her late mother's friends, because they were made conditional upon her quitting the wretched man, her father, who had no friends left, and shrinking with instinctive delicacy from appealing in their behalf to that true and noble heart which he hated, and had, through its greatest and purest goodness, deeply wronged by misconstruction and ill report, this young girl had struggled alone and unassisted to maintain him by the labour of her hands. That through the utmost depths of poverty and affliction she had toiled, never turning aside for an instant from her task, never wearied by the petulant gloom of a sick man sustained by no consoling recollections of the past or hopes of the future; never repining for the comforts she had rejected, or bewailing the hard lot she had voluntarily incurred. That every little accomplishment she had acquired in happier days had been put into requisition for this purpose, and directed to this one end. That for two long years, toiling by day and often too by night, working at the needle, the pencil, and the pen, and submitting, as a daily governess, to such caprices and indignities as women (with daughters too) too often love to inflict upon their own sex when they serve in such capacities, as though in jealousy of the superior intelligence which they are necessitated to employ,—indignities, in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred, heaped upon persons immeasurably and incalculably their betters, but outweighing in comparison any that the most heartless blackleg would put upon his groom—that for two long years, by dint of labouring in all these capacities and wearying in none, she had not succeeded in the sole aim and object of her life, but that, overwhelmed by accumulated difficulties and disappointments, she had been compelled to seek out her mother's old friend, and, with a bursting heart, to confide in him at last.

"If I had been poor," said brother Charles, with sparkling eyes; "If I had been poor, Mr. Nickleby, my dear Sir, which thank God I am not, I would have denied myself—of course anybody would under such circumstances—

the commonest necessaries of life, to help her. As it is, the task is a difficult one. If her father were dead, nothing could be easier, for then she should share and cheer the happiest home that brother Ned and I could have, as if she were our child or sister. But he is still alive. Nobody can help him—that has been tried a thousand times; he was not abandoned by all without good cause, I know."

"Cannot she be persuaded to——" Nicholas hesitated when he had got thus far.

"To leave him?" said brother Charles. "Who could entreat a child to desert her parent? Such entreaties, limited to her seeing him occasionally, have been urged upon her—not by me—but always with the same result."

"Is he kind to her?" said Nicholas. "Does he requite her affection?"

"True kindness, considerate self-denying kindness, is not in his nature," returned Mr. Cheeryble. "Such kindness as he knows, he regards her with, I believe. The mother was a gentle, loving, confiding creature, and although he wounded her from their marriage till her death as cruelly and wantonly as ever man did, she never ceased to love him. She commended him on her death-bed to her child's care. Her child has never forgotten it, and never will."

"Have you no influence over him?" asked Nicholas.

"I, my dear sir! The last man in the world. Such is his jealousy and hatred of me, that if he knew his daughter had opened her heart to me, he would render her life miserable with his reproaches; although—this is the inconsistency and selfishness of his character—although if he knew that every penny she had came from me, he would not relinquish one personal desire that the most reckless expenditure of her scanty stock could gratify."

"An unnatural scoundrel!" said Nicholas, indignantly.

"We will use no harsh terms," said brother Charles, in a gentle voice; "but accommodate ourselves to the circumstances in which this young lady is placed. Such assistance as I have prevailed upon her to accept, I have been obliged, at her own earnest request, to dole out in the smallest portions, lest he, finding how easily money was procured, should squander it even more lightly than he is accustomed to do. She has come to and fro, to and fro, secretly and by night, to take even this; and I cannot bear

that things should go on in this way, Mr. Nickleby—I really cannot bear it."

Then it came out by little and little, how that the twins had been revolving in their good old heads manifold plans and schemes for helping this young lady in the most delicate and considerate way, and so that her father should not suspect the source whence the aid was derived; and how they had at last come to the conclusion, that the best course would be to make a feint of purchasing her little drawings and ornamental work at a high price, and keeping up a constant demand for the same. For the furtherance of which end and object it was necessary that somebody should represent the dealer in such commodities, and after great deliberation they had pitched upon Nicholas to support this character.

"He knows me," said brother Charles, "and he knows my brother Ned. Neither of us would do. Frank is a very good fellow—a very fine fellow—but we are afraid that he might be a little flighty and thoughtless in such a delicate matter, and that he might, perhaps—that he might, in short, be too susceptible (for she is a beautiful creature, Sir, just what her poor mother was), and falling in love with her before he well knew his own mind, carry pain and sorrow into that innocent breast, which we would be the humble instruments of gradually making happy. He took an extraordinary interest in her fortunes when he first happened to encounter her; and we gather from the inquiries we have made of him, that it was she in whose behalf he made that turmoil which led to your first acquaintance."

Nicholas stammered out that he had before suspected the possibility of such a thing; and in explanation of its having occurred to him, described when and where he had seen the young lady himself.

"Well; then you see," continued brother Charles, "that *he* wouldn't do. Tim Linkinwater is out of the question; for Tim, Sir, is such a tremendous fellow, that he could never contain himself, but would go to loggerheads with the father before he had been in the place five minutes. You don't know what Tim is, Sir, when he is roused by anything that appeals to his feelings very strongly—then he is terrific, Sir, is Tim Linkinwater—absolutely terrific. Now, in you we can repose the strictest confidence; in you

we have seen—or at least *I* have seen, and that's the same thing, for there's no difference between me and my brother Ned, except that he is the finest creature that ever lived, and that there is not, and never will be, anybody like him in all the world—in you we have seen domestic virtues and affections, and delicacy of feeling, which exactly qualify you for such an office. And you are the man, Sir."

"The young lady, Sir," said Nicholas, who felt so embarrassed that he had no small difficulty in saying anything at all—"Does—is—is she a party to this innocent deceit?"

"Yes, yes," returned Mr. Cheeryble; "at least she knows you come from us; she does *not* know, however, but that we shall dispose of these little productions that you'll purchase from time to time; and, perhaps, if you did it very well (that is, *very* well indeed), perhaps she might be brought to believe that we—that we made a profit of them. Eh? Eh?"

In this guileless and most kind simplicity, brother Charles was so happy, and in this possibility of the young lady being led to think that she was under no obligation to him, he evidently felt so sanguine and had so much delight, that Nicholas would not breathe a doubt upon the subject.

All this time, however, there hovered upon the tip of his tongue a confession that the very same objections which Mr. Cheeryble had stated to the employment of his nephew in this commission applied with at least equal force and validity to himself, and a hundred times had he been upon the point of avowing the real state of his feelings, and entreating to be released from it. But as often, treading upon the heels of this impulse, came another which urged him to refrain, and to keep his secret to his own breast. "Why should I," thought Nicholas, "why should I throw difficulties in the way of this benevolent and high-minded design? What if I do love and reverence this good and lovely creature—should I not appear a most arrogant and shallow coxcomb if I gravely represented that there was any danger of her falling in love with me? Besides, have I no confidence in myself? Am I not now bound in honour to repress these thoughts? Has not this excellent man a right to my best and heartiest services, and should any considerations of self deter me from rendering them?"

Asking himself such questions as these, Nicholas men-

tally answered with great emphasis "No!" and persuading himself that he was a most conscientious and glorious martyr, nobly resolved to do what, if he had examined his own heart a little more carefully, he would have found he could not resist. Such is the sleight of hand by which we juggle with ourselves, and change our very weaknesses into staunch and most magnanimous virtues!

Mr. Cheeryble, being of course wholly unsuspicious that such reflections were presenting themselves to his young friend, proceeded to give him the needful credentials and directions for his first visit, which was to be made next morning; and all preliminaries being arranged, and the strictest secrecy enjoined, Nicholas walked home for the night very thoughtfully indeed.

The place to which Mr. Cheeryble had directed him was a row of mean and not over-cleanly houses, situated within "the Rules" of the King's Bench Prison, and not many hundred paces distant from the obelisk in Saint George's Fields. The Rules are a certain liberty adjoining the prison, and comprising some dozen streets in which debtors who can raise money to pay large fees, from which their creditors do *not* derive any benefit, are permitted to reside by the wise provisions of the same enlightened laws which leave the debtor who can raise no money to starve in jail, without the food, clothing, lodging, or warmth, which are provided for felons convicted of the most atrocious crimes that can disgrace humanity. There are many pleasant fictions of the law in constant operation, but there is not one so pleasant or practically humorous as that which supposes every man to be of equal value in its impartial eye, and the benefits of all laws to be equally attainable by all men, without the smallest reference to the furniture of their pockets.

To the row of houses indicated to him by Mr. Charles Cheeryble, Nicholas directed his steps, without much troubling his head with such matters as these; and at this row of houses—after traversing a very dirty and dusty suburb, of which minor theatricals, shell-fish, ginger-beer, spring vans, green-grocery, and brokers' shops, appeared to compose the main and most prominent features—he at length arrived with a palpitating heart. There were small gardens in front which, being wholly neglected in all other respects, served as little pens for the dust to collect in,

until the wind came round the corner and blew it down the road. Opening the rickety gate which, dangling on its broken hinges before one of these, half admitted and half repulsed the visitor, Nicholas knocked at the street door with a faltering hand.

It was in truth a shabby house outside, with very dim parlour windows and very small show of blinds, and very dirty muslin curtains dangling across the lower panes on very loose and limp strings. Neither, when the door was opened, did the inside appear to belie the outward promise, as there was faded carpeting on the stairs and faded oil-cloth in the passage; in addition to which discomforts a gentleman Ruler was smoking hard in the front parlour (though it was not yet noon), while the lady of the house was busily engaged in turpentining the disjointed fragments of a tent-bedstead at the door of the back parlour, as if in preparation for the reception of some new lodger who had been fortunate enough to engage it.

Nicholas had ample time to make these observations while the little boy, who went on errands for the lodgers, clattered down the kitchen stairs and was heard to scream, as in some remote cellar, for Miss Bray's servant, who, presently appearing and requesting him to follow her, caused him to evince greater symptoms of nervousness and disorder than so natural a consequence of his having inquired for that young lady would seem calculated to occasion.

Up-stairs he went, however, and into a front room he was shown, and there, seated at a little table by the window, on which were drawing-materials with which she was occupied, sat the beautiful girl who had so engrossed his thoughts, and who, surrounded by all the new and strong interest which Nicholas attached to her story, seemed now, in his eyes, a thousand times more beautiful than he had ever yet supposed her.

But how the graces and elegances which she had dispersed about the poorly-furnished room, went to the heart of Nicholas! Flowers, plants, birds, the harp, the old piano whose notes had sounded so much sweeter in by-gone times —how many struggles had it cost her to keep these two last links of that broken chain which bound her yet to home! With every slender ornament, the occupation of her leisure hours, replete with that graceful charm which

lingers in every little tasteful work of woman's hands, how much patient endurance and how many gentle affections were entwined! He felt as though the smile of Heaven were on the little chamber; as though the beautiful devotion of so young and weak a creature, had shed a ray of its own on the inanimate things around and made them beautiful as itself; as though the halo with which old painters surround the bright angels of a sinless world played about a being akin in spirit to them, and its light were visibly before him.

And yet Nicholas was in the Rules of the King's Bench Prison! If he had been in Italy indeed, and the time had been sunset, and the scene a stately terrace;—but, there is one broad sky over all the world, and, whether it be blue or cloudy, the same heaven beyond it, so, perhaps, he had no need of compunction for thinking as he did.

It is not to be supposed that he took in everything at one glance, for he had as yet been unconscious of the presence of a sick man propped up with pillows in an easy chair, who, moving restlessly and impatiently in his seat, attracted his attention.

He was scarce fifty, perhaps, but so emaciated as to appear much older. His features presented the remains of a handsome countenance, but one in which the embers of strong and impetuous passions were easier to be traced than any expression which would have rendered a far plainer face much more prepossessing. His looks were very haggard, and his limbs and body literally worn to the bone, but there was something of the old fire in the large sunken eye notwithstanding, and it seemed to kindle afresh as he struck a thick stick, with which he seemed to have supported himself in his seat, impatiently on the floor twice or thrice, and called his daughter by her name.

"Madeline, who is this? What does anybody want here? Who told a stranger we could be seen? What is it?"

"I believe——" the young lady began, as she inclined her head with an air of some confusion, in reply to the salutation of Nicholas.

"You always believe," returned her father, petulantly. "What is it?"

By this time Nicholas had recovered sufficient presence of mind to speak for himself, so he said (as it had been agreed he should say) that he had called about a pair of

hand-screens, and some painted velvet for an ottoman, both of which were required to be of the most elegant design possible, neither time nor expense being of the smallest consideration. He had also to pay for the two drawings, with many thanks, and, advancing to the little table, he laid upon it a bank note, folded in an envelope and sealed.

"See that the money is right, Madeline," said the father. "Open the paper, my dear."

"It's quite right, papa, I'm sure."

"Here!" said Mr. Bray, putting out his hand, and opening and shutting his bony fingers with irritable impatience. "Let me see. What are you talking about, Madeline? You're sure? How can you be sure of any such thing? Five pounds—well, is *that* right?"

"Quite," said Madeline, bending over him. She was so busily employed in arranging the pillows that Nicholas could not see her face, but as she stooped he thought he saw a tear fall.

"Ring the bell, ring the bell," said the sick man, with the same nervous eagerness, and motioning towards it with such a quivering hand that the bank note rustled in the air. "Tell her to get it changed—to get me a newspaper—to buy me some grapes—another bottle of the wine that I had last week—and—and—I forget half I want just now, but she can go out again. Let her get those first—those first. Now, Madeline, my love, quick, quick! Good God, how slow you are!"

"He remembers nothing that *she* wants!" thought Nicholas. Perhaps something of what he thought was expressed in his countenance, for the sick man turning towards him with great asperity, demanded to know if he waited for a receipt.

"It is no matter at all," said Nicholas.

"No matter! What do you mean, Sir?" was the tart rejoinder. "No matter! Do you think you bring your paltry money here as a favour or a gift; or as a matter of business, and in return for value received? D—n you, Sir, because you can't appreciate the time and taste which are bestowed upon the goods you deal in, do you think you give your money away? Do you know that you are talking to a gentleman, Sir, who at one time could have bought up fifty such men as you and all you have? What do you mean?"

"I merely mean that as I shall have many dealings with this lady, if she will kindly allow me, I will not trouble her with such forms," said Nicholas.

"Then *I* mean, if you please, that we'll have as many forms as we can," returned the father. "My daughter, Sir, requires no kindness from you or anybody else. Have the goodness to confine your dealings strictly to trade and business, and not to travel beyond it. Every petty tradesman is to begin to pity her now, is he? Upon my soul! Very pretty. Madeline, my dear, give him a receipt; and mind you always do so."

While she was feigning to write it, and Nicholas was ruminating upon the extraordinary but by no means uncommon character thus presented to his observation, the invalid, who appeared at times to suffer great bodily pain, sank back in his chair and moaned out a feeble complaint that the girl had been gone an hour, and that everybody conspired to goad him.

"When," said Nicholas, as he took the piece of paper, "when shall I—call again?"

This was addressed to the daughter, but the father answered immediately.

"When you're requested to call, Sir, and not before. Don't worry and persecute. Madeline, my dear, when is this person to call again?"

"Oh, not for a long time—not for three or four weeks—it is not necessary, indeed—I can do without," said the young lady, with great eagerness.

"Why, how are we to do without?" urged her father, not speaking above his breath. "Three or four weeks, Madeline! Three or four weeks!"

"Then sooner—sooner, if you please," said the young lady, turning to Nicholas.

"Three or four weeks!" muttered the father. "Madeline, what on earth—do nothing for three or four weeks!"

"It is a long time, ma'am," said Nicholas.

"You think so, do you?" retorted the father, angrily. "If I chose to beg, Sir, and stoop to ask assistance from people I despise, three or four months would not be a long time—three or four years would not be a long time. Understand, Sir, that is if I chose to be dependent; but as I don't, you may call in a week."

Nicholas bowed low to the young lady and retired, pon-

dering upon Mr. Bray's ideas of independence, and devoutly hoping that there might be few such independent spirits as he mingling with the baser clay of humanity.

He heard a light footstep above him as he descended the stairs, and looking round, he saw that the young lady was standing there, and, glancing timidly towards him, seemed to hesitate whether she should call him back or no. The best way of settling the question was to turn back at once, which Nicholas did.

"I don't know whether I do right in asking you, Sir," said Madeline, hurriedly, "but pray—pray—do not mention to my poor mother's dear friends what has passed here to-day. He has suffered much, and is worse this morning. I beg you, Sir, as a boon, a favour to myself."

"You have but to hint a wish," returned Nicholas fervently, "and I would hazard my life to gratify it."

"You speak hastily, Sir."

"Truly and sincerely," rejoined Nicholas, his lips trembling as he formed the words, "if ever man spoke truly yet. I am not skilled in disguising my feelings, and if I were, I could not hide my heart from you. Dear madam, as I know your history, and feel as men and angels must who hear and see such things, I do entreat you to believe that I would die to serve you."

The young lady turned away her head, and was plainly weeping.

"Forgive me," said Nicholas, with respectful earnestness, "if I seem to say too much, or to presume upon the confidence which has been entrusted to me. But I could not leave you as if my interest and sympathy expired with the commission of the day. I am your faithful servant, humbly devoted to you from this hour—devoted in strict truth and honour to him who sent me here, and in pure integrity of heart, and distant respect for you. If I meant more or less than this, I should be unworthy his regard, and false to the very nature that prompts the honest words I utter."

She waved her hand, entreating him to be gone, but answered not a word. Nicholas could say no more, and silently withdrew. And thus ended his first interview with Madeline Bray.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MR. RALPH NICKLEBY HAS SOME CONFIDENTIAL INTERCOURSE WITH ANOTHER OLD FRIEND. THEY CONCERT BETWEEN THEM A PROJECT, WHICH PROMISES WELL FOR BOTH.

"THERE go the three quarters past!" muttered Newman Noggs, listening to the chimes of some neighbouring church, "and my dinner time's two. He does it on purpose. He makes a point of it. It's just like him."

It was in his own little den of an office and on the top of his official stool that Newman thus soliloquised; and the soliloquy referred, as Newman's grumbling soliloquies usually did, to Ralph Nickleby.

"I don't believe he ever had an appetite," said Newman, "except for pounds, shillings, and pence, and with them he's as greedy as a wolf. I should like to have him compelled to swallow one of every English coin. The penny would be an awkward morsel—but the crown—ha! ha!"

His good humour being in some degree restored by the vision of Ralph Nickleby swallowing, perforce, a five-shilling-piece, Newman slowly brought forth from his desk one of those portable bottles, currently known as pocket-pistols, and shaking the same close to his ear so as to produce a rippling sound very cool and pleasant to listen to, suffered his features to relax, and took a gurgling drink, which relaxed them still more. Replacing the cork he smacked his lips twice or thrice with an air of great relish, and, the taste of the liquor having by this time evaporated, recurred to his grievances again.

"Five minutes to three," growled Newman, "it can't want more by this time; and I had my breakfast at eight o'clock, and *such* a breakfast! and my right dinner time two! And I might have a nice little bit of hot roast meat spoiling at home all this time—how does *he* know I haven't! 'Don't go till I come back,' 'Don't go till I come back,' day after day. What do you always go out at my dinner time for then—eh? Don't you know it's nothing but aggravation—eh?"

These words, though uttered in a very loud key, were addressed to nothing but empty air. The recital of his wrongs, however, seemed to have the effect of making Newman Noggs desperate; for he flattened his old hat upon his head, and drawing on the everlasting gloves, declared with great vehemence, that come what might, he would go to dinner that very minute.

Carrying this resolution into instant effect, he had advanced as far as the passage, when the sound of the latch-key in the street door caused him to make a precipitate retreat into his own office again.

"Here he is," growled Newman, "and somebody with him. Now it'll be 'Stop till this gentleman's gone.' But I won't—that's flat."

So saying, Newman slipped into a tall empty closet which opened with two half doors, and shut himself up; intending to slip out directly Ralph was safe inside his own room.

"Noggs," cried Ralph, "where is that fellow?—Noggs."

But not a word said Newman.

"The dog has gone to his dinner, though I told him not," muttered Ralph, looking into the office and pulling out his watch. "Humph! You had better come in here, Gride. My man's out, and the sun is hot upon my room. This is cool and in the shade, if you don't mind roughing it."

"Not at all, Mr. Nickleby, oh not at all. All places are alike to me, Sir. Ah! very nice indeed. Oh! very nice!"

The person who made this reply was a little old man, of about seventy or seventy-five years of age, of a very lean figure, much bent, and slightly twisted. He wore a grey coat with a very narrow collar, an old-fashioned waistcoat of ribbed black silk, and such scanty trousers as displayed his shrunken spindle-shanks in their full ugliness. The only articles of display or ornament in his dress, were a steel watch-chain to which were attached some large gold seals; and a black ribbon into which, in compliance with an old fashion scarcely ever observed in these days, his grey hair was gathered behind. His nose and chin were sharp and prominent, his jaws had fallen inwards from loss of teeth, his face was shrivelled and yellow, save where the cheeks were streaked with the colour of a dry winter apple; and where his beard had been, there lingered yet a few grey

tufts which seemed, like the ragged eyebrows, to denote the badness of the soil from which they sprang. The whole air and attitude of the form, was one of stealthy cat-like obsequiousness; the whole expression of the face was concentrated in a wrinkled leer, compounded of cunning, lecherousness, slyness, and avarice.

Such was old Arthur Gride, in whose face there was not a wrinkle, in whose dress there was not one spare fold or plait, but expressed the most covetous and griping penury, and sufficiently indicated his belonging to that class of which Ralph Nickleby was a member. Such was old Arthur Gride, as he sat in a low chair looking up into the face of Ralph Nickleby, who, lounging upon the tall office stool, with his arms upon his knees, looked down into his, —a match for him on whatever errand he had come.

"And how have you been?" said Gride, feigning great interest in Ralph's state of health. "I haven't seen you for—oh! not for—"

"Not for a long time," said Ralph, with a peculiar smile, importing that he very well knew it was not on a mere visit of compliment that his friend had come. "It was a narrow chance that you saw me now, for I had only just come up to the door as you turned the corner."

"I am very lucky," observed Gride.

"So men say," replied Ralph, drily.

The older money-lender wagged his chin and smiled, but he originated no new remark, and they sat for some little time without speaking. Each was looking out to take the other at a disadvantage.

"Come, Gride," said Ralph, at length; "what's in the wind to-day?"

"Aha! you're a bold man, Mr. Nickleby," cried the other, apparently very much relieved by Ralph's leading the way to business. "Oh dear, dear, what a bold man you are!"

"Why, you have a sleek and slinking way with you that makes me seem so by contrast," returned Ralph. "I don't know but that yours may answer better, but I want the patience for it."

"You were born a genius, Mr. Nickleby," said old Arthur. "Deep, deep, deep. Ah!"

"Deep enough," retorted Ralph, "to know that I shall need all the depth I have, when men like you begin to com-

pliment. You know I have stood by when you fawned and flattered other people, and I remember pretty well what *that* always led to."

"Ha, ha, ha," rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. "So you do, so you do, no doubt. Not a man knows it better. Well, it's a pleasant thing now to think that you remember old times. Oh dear!"

"Now then," said Ralph, composedly; "what's in the wind, I ask again—what is it?"

"See that now!" cried the other. "He can't even keep from business while we're chatting over bygones! Oh dear, dear, what a man it is!"

"*Which* of the bygones do you want to revive?" said Ralph. "One of them, I know, or you wouldn't talk about them."

"He suspects even me!" cried old Arthur, holding up his hands. "Even me—oh dear, even me. What a man it is! Ha, ha, ha! What a man it is! Mr. Nickleby against all the world—there's nobody like him. A giant among pigmies—a giant—a giant!"

Ralph looked at the old dog with a quiet smile as he chuckled on in this strain, and Newman Noggs in the closet felt his heart sink within him as the prospect of dinner grew fainter and fainter.

"I must humour him though," cried old Arthur; "he must have his way—a wilful man, as the Scotch say—well, well, they're a wise people, the Scotch—he will talk about business, and won't give away his time for nothing. He's very right. Time is money—time is money."

"He was one of us who made that saying, I should think," said Ralph. "Time is money, and very good money too, to those who reckon interest by it. Time *is* money! Yes, and time costs money; it's rather an expensive article to some people we could name, or I forget my trade."

In rejoinder to this sally, old Arthur again raised his hands, again chuckled, and again ejaculated "What a man it is!" which done, he dragged the low chair a little nearer to Ralph's high stool, and looking upwards into his immovable face, said,

"What would you say to me, if I was to tell you that I was—that I was—going to be married?"

"I should tell you," replied Ralph, looking coldly down

upon him, "that for some purpose of your own you told a lie, and that it wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last; that I wasn't surprised and wasn't to be taken in."

"Then I tell you seriously that I am," said old Arthur.

"And *I* tell you seriously," rejoined Ralph, "what I told you this minute. Stay. Let me look at you. There's a liquorish devilry in your face—what is this?"

"I wouldn't deceive *you*, you know," whined Arthur Gride; "I couldn't do it, I should be mad to try. I—I—to deceive Mr. Nickleby! The pigmy to impose upon the giant. I ask again—he, he, he!—what should you say to me if I was to tell you that I was going to be married?"

"To some old hag?" said Ralph.

"No, no," cried Arthur, interrupting him, and rubbing his hands in an ecstasy. "Wrong, wrong again. Mr. Nickleby for once at fault—out, quite out! To a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen. Dark eyes—long eyelashes—ripe and ruddy lips that to look at is to long to kiss—beautiful clustering hair that one's fingers itch to play with—such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily, thinking of twining his arm about it—little feet that tread so lightly they hardly seem to walk upon the ground—to marry all this, Sir—this—hey, hey!"

"This is something more than common drivelling," said Ralph, after listening with a curled lip to the old sinner's raptures. "The girl's name?"

"Oh deep, deep! See now how deep that is!" exclaimed old Arthur. "He knows I want his help, he knows he can give it me, he knows it must all turn to his advantage, he sees the thing already. Her name—is there nobody within hearing?"

"Why, who the devil should there be?" retorted Ralph, testily.

"I didn't know but that perhaps somebody might be passing up or down the stairs," said Arthur Gride, after looking out at the door and carefully reclosing it; "or but that your man might have come back and might have been listening outside—clerks and servants have a trick of listening, and I should have been very uncomfortable if Mr. Noggs—"

"Curse Mr. Noggs," said Ralph, sharply, "and go on with what you have to say."

"Curse Mr. Noggs, by all means," rejoined old Arthur; "I am sure I have not the least objection to that. Her name is—"

"Well," said Ralph, rendered very irritable by old Arthur's pausing again, "what is it?"

"Madeline Bray."

Whatever reasons there might have been—and Arthur Gride appeared to have anticipated some—for the mention of this name producing an effect upon Ralph, or whatever effect it really did produce upon him, he permitted none to manifest itself, but calmly repeated the name several times, as if reflecting when and where he had heard it before.

"Bray," said Ralph. "Bray—there was young Bray of ——no, he never had a daughter."

"You remember Bray?" rejoined Arthur Gride.

"No," said Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

"Not Walter Bray! The dashing man, who used his handsome wife so ill?"

"If you seek to recall any particular dashing man to my recollection by such a trait as that," said Ralph, shrugging his shoulders, "I shall confound him with nine-tenths of the dashing men I have ever known."

"Tut, tut. That Bray who is now in the Rules of the Bench," said old Arthur. "You can't have forgotten Bray. Both of us did business with him. Why, he owes you money—"

"Oh *him!*" rejoined Ralph. "Ay, ay. Now you speak. Oh! It's *his* daughter, is it?"

Naturally as this was said, it was not said so naturally but that a kindred spirit like old Arthur Gride might have discerned a design upon the part of Ralph to lead him on to much more explicit statements and explanations than he would have volunteered, or than Ralph could in all likelihood have obtained by any other means. Old Arthur, however, was so intent upon his own designs, that he suffered himself to be over reached, and had no suspicion but that his good friend was in earnest.

"I knew you couldn't forget him, when you came to think for a moment," he said.

"You were right," answered Ralph. "But old Arthur Gride and matrimony is a most anomalous conjunction of words; old Arthur Gride and dark eyes and eyelashes, and lips that to look at is to long to kiss, and clustering hair

that he wants to play with, and waists that he wants to span, and little feet that don't tread upon anything—old Arthur Gride and such things as these is more monstrous still; but old Arthur Gride marrying the daughter of a ruined 'dashing man' in the Rules of the Bench, is the most monstrous and incredible of all. Plainly, friend Arthur Gride, if you want any help from me in this business (which of course you do, or you would not be here), speak out, and to the purpose. And, above all, don't talk to me of its turning to my advantage, for I know it must turn to yours also, and to a good round tune too, or you would have no finger in such a pie as this."

There was enough acerbity and sarcasm not only in the matter of Ralph's speech, but in the tone of voice in which he uttered it, and the looks with which he eked it out, to have fired even the ancient usurer's cold blood and flushed even his withered cheek. But he gave vent to no demonstration of anger, contenting himself with exclaiming as before, "What a man it is!" and rolling his head from side to side, as if in unrestrained enjoyment of his freedom and drollery. Clearly observing, however, from the expression in Ralph's features, that he had best come to the point as speedily as might be, he composed himself for more serious business, and entered upon the pith and marrow of his negotiation.

First, he dwelt upon the fact that Madeline Bray was devoted to the support and maintenance, and was a slave to every wish, of her only parent, who had no other friend on earth; to which Ralph rejoined that he had heard something of the kind before, and that if she had known a little more of the world, she wouldn't have been such a fool.

Secondly, he enlarged upon the character of her father, arguing, that even taking it for granted that he loved her in return with the utmost affection of which he was capable, yet he loved himself a great deal better; which Ralph said it was quite unnecessary to say anything more about, as that was very natural, and probable enough.

And, thirdly, old Arthur premised that the girl was a delicate and beautiful creature, and that he had really a hankering to have her for his wife. To this Ralph deigned no other rejoinder than a harsh smile, and a glance at the shrivelled old creature before him, which were, however, sufficiently expressive.

"Now," said Gride, "for the little plan I have in my mind to bring this about; because, I haven't offered myself even to the father yet, I should have told you. But that you have gathered already? Ah! oh dear, oh dear, what an edged tool you are!"

"Don't play with me then," said Ralph, impatiently. "You know the proverb."

"A reply always on the tip of his tongue!" cried old Arthur, raising his hands and eyes in admiration. "He is always prepared! Oh dear, what a blessing to have such a ready wit, and so much ready money to back it!" Then, suddenly changing his tone, he went on: "I have been backwards and forwards to Bray's lodgings several times within the last six months. It is just half a year since I first saw this delicate morsel, and, oh dear, what a delicate morsel it is! But that is neither here nor there. I am his detaining creditor for seventeen hundred pounds."

"You talk as if you were the only detaining creditor," said Ralph, pulling out his pocket-book. "I am another for nine hundred and seventy-five pounds four and threepence."

"The only other, Mr. Nickleby," said old Arthur, eagerly. "The only other. Nobody else went to the expense of lodging a detainer, trusting to our holding him fast enough, I warrant you. We both fell into the same snare—oh, dear, what a pitfall it was; it almost ruined me! And lent him our money upon bills, with only one name besides his own, which to be sure everybody supposed to be a good one, and was as negotiable as money, but which turned out—you know how. Just as we should have come upon him, he died insolvent. Ah! It went very nigh to ruin me, that loss did!"

"Go on with your scheme," said Ralph. "It's of no use raising the cry of our trade just now; there's nobody to hear us."

"It's always as well to talk that way," returned old Arthur, with a chuckle, "whether there's anybody to hear us or not. Practice makes perfect, you know. Now, if I offer myself to Bray as his son-in-law, upon one simple condition that the moment I am fast married he shall be quietly released, and have an allowance to live just t'other side the water like a gentleman (he can't live long, for I have asked his doctor, and he declares that his complaint

is one of the heart and it is impossible), and if all the advantages of this condition are properly stated and dwelt upon to him, do you think he could resist me? And if he could not resist *me*, do you think his daughter could resist *him?* Shouldn't I have her Mrs. Arthur Gride—pretty Mrs. Arthur Gride—a tit-bit—a dainty chick—shouldn't I have her Mrs. Arthur Gride in a week, a month, a day—any time I chose to name?"

"Go on," said Ralph, nodding his head deliberately, and speaking in a tone whose studied coldness presented a strange contrast to the rapturous squeak to which his friend had gradually mounted. "Go on. You didn't come here to ask me that."

"Oh dear, how you talk!" cried old Arthur, edging himself closer still to Ralph. "Of course, I didn't—I don't pretend I did! I came to ask what you would take from me, if I prospered with the father, for this debt of yours—five shillings in the pound—six and eightpence—ten shillings? I *would* go as far as ten for such a friend as you, we have always been on such good terms, but you won't be so hard upon me as that, I know. Now, will you?"

"There's something more to be told," said Ralph, as stony and immovable as ever.

"Yes, yes, there is. but you won't give me time," returned Arthur Gride. "I want a backer in this matter—one who can talk, and urge, and press a point, which you can do as no man can. I can't do that, for I am a poor, timid, nervous creature. Now, if you get a good composition for this debt, which you long ago gave up for lost, you'll stand my friend, and help me. Won't you?"

"There's something more," said Ralph.

"No, no, indeed," cried Arthur Gride.

"Yes, yes, indeed. I tell you yes," said Ralph.

"Oh!" returned old Arthur, feigning to be suddenly enlightened. "You mean something more, as concerns myself and my intention. Ay, surely, surely. Shall I mention that?"

"I think you had better," rejoined Ralph, drily.

"I didn't like to trouble you with that, because I supposed your interest would cease with your own concern in the affair," said Arthur Gride. "That's kind of you to ask. Oh dear, how very kind of you! Why, supposing I had a knowledge of some property—some little property—

very little—to which this pretty chick was entitled; which nobody does or can know of at this time, but which her husband could sweep into his pouch, if he knew as much I as do, would that account for——"

"For the whole proceeding," rejoined Ralph, abruptly. "Now, let me turn this matter over, and consider what I ought to have if I should help you to success."

"But don't be hard," cried old Arthur, raising his hands with an imploring gesture, and speaking in a tremulous voice. "Don't be too hard upon me. It's a very small property, it is indeed. Say the ten shillings, and we'll close the bargain. It's more than I ought to give, but you're so kind—shall we say the ten? Do now, do."

Ralph took no notice of these supplications, but sat for three or four minutes in a brown study, looking thoughtfully at the person from whom they proceeded. After sufficient cogitation he broke silence, and it certainly could not be objected that he used any needless circumlocution, or failed to speak directly to the purpose.

"If you married this girl without me," said Ralph, "you must pay my debt in full, because you couldn't set her father free otherwise. It's plain, then, that I must have the whole amount, clear of all deduction or incumbrance, or I should lose from being honoured with your confidence, instead of gaining by it. That's the first article of the treaty. For the second, I shall stipulate that for my trouble in negotiation and persuasion, and helping you to this fortune, I have five hundred pounds—that's very little, because you have the ripe lips, and the clustering hair, and what not, all to yourself. For the third and last article, I require that you execute a bond to me, this day, binding yourself in the payment of these two sums, before noon of the day of your marriage with Madeline Bray. You have told me I can urge and press a point. I press this one, and will take nothing less than these terms. Accept them if you like. If not marry her without me if you can. I shall still get my debt."

To all entreaties, protestations, and offers of compromise between his own proposals and those which Arthur Gride had first suggested, Ralph was deaf as an adder. He would enter into no further discussion of the subject, and while old Arthur dilated upon the enormity of his demands and proposed modifications of them, approaching by degrees

nearer and nearer to the terms he resisted, sat perfectly mute, looking with an air of quiet abstraction over the entries and papers in his pocket-book. Finding that it was impossible to make any impression upon his staunch friend, Arthur Gride, who had prepared himself for some such result before he came, consented with a heavy heart to the proposed treaty, and upon the spot filled up the bond required (Ralph kept such instruments handy), after exacting the condition that Mr. Nickleby should accompany him to Bray's lodgings that very hour, and open the negotiation at once, should circumstances appear auspicious and favourable to their designs.

In pursuance of this last understanding the worthy gentlemen went out together shortly afterwards, and Newman Noggs emerged, bottle in hand, from the cupboard, out of the upper door of which, at the imminent risk of detection, he had more than once thrust his red nose when such parts of the subject were under discussion as interested him most.

"I have no appetite now," said Newman, putting the flask in his pocket. "I've had *my* dinner."

Having delivered this observation in a very grievous and doleful tone, Newman reached the door in one long limp, and came back again in another.

"I don't know who she may be, or what she may be," he said; "but I pity her with all my heart and soul; and I can't help her, nor can I any of the people against whom a hundred tricks—but none so vile as this—are plotted every day! Well, that adds to my pain, but not to theirs. The thing is no worse because I know it, and it tortures me as well as them. Gride and Nickleby! Good pair for a curricle—oh roguery! roguery! roguery!"

With these reflections, and a very hard knock on the crown of his unfortunate hat at each repetition of the last word, Newman Noggs, whose brain was a little muddled by so much of the contents of the pocket-pistol as had found their way there during his recent concealment, went forth to seek such consolation as might be derivable from the beef and greens of some cheap eating-house.

Meanwhile the two plotters had betaken themselves to the same house whither Nicholas had repaired for the first time but a few mornings before, and having obtained access to Mr. Bray, and found his daughter from home, had, by a train of the most masterly approaches that Ralph's utmost

skill could frame, at length laid open the real object of their visit.

"There he sits, Mr. Bray," said Ralph, as the invalid, not yet recovered from his surprise, reclined in his chair, looking alternately at him and Arthur Gride. "What if he has had the ill fortune to be one cause of your detention in this place—I have been another; men must live; you are too much a man of the world not to see that in its true light. We offer the best reparation in our power. Reparation! Here is an offer of marriage, that many a titled father would leap at, for his child. Mr. Arthur Gride, with the fortune of a prince. Think what a haul it is!"

"My daughter, Sir," returned Bray, haughtily, "as *I* have brought her up, would be rich recompense for the largest fortune that a man could bestow in exchange for her hand."

"Precisely what I told you," said the artful Ralph, turning to his friend, old Arthur. "Precisely what made me consider the thing so fair and easy. There is no obligation on either side. You have money, and Miss Madeline has beauty and worth. She has youth, you have money. She has not money, you have not youth. Tit for tat—quits—a match of Heaven's own making!"

"Matches are made in Heaven, they say," added Arthur Gride, leering hideously at the father-in-law he wanted. "If we are married, it will be destiny, according to that."

"Then think, Mr. Bray," said Ralph, hastily substituting for this argument considerations more nearly allied to earth, "think what a stake is involved in the acceptance or rejection of these proposals of my friend—"

"How can I accept or reject," interrupted Mr. Bray, with an irritable consciousness that it really rested with him to decide. "It is for my daughter to accept or reject; it is for my daughter. You know that."

"True," said Ralph, emphatically; "but you have still the power to advise; to state the reasons for and against; to hint a wish"

"To hint a wish, Sir!" returned the debtor, proud and mean by turns, and selfish at all times. "I am her father, am I not? Why should I hint, and beat about the bush? Do you suppose, like her mother's friends and my enemies —a curse upon them all—that there is anything in what

she has done for me but duty, Sir, but duty? Or do you think that my having been unfortunate is a sufficient reason why our relative positions should be changed, and that she should command and I should obey? Hint a wish, too! Perhaps you think because you see me in this place and scarcely able to leave this chair without assistance, that I am some broken-spirited dependent creature, without the courage or power to do what I may think best for my own child. Still the power to hint a wish! I hope so!"

"Pardon me," returned Ralph, who thoroughly knew his man, and had taken his ground accordingly; "you do not hear me out. I was about to say that your hinting a wish—even hinting a wish—would surely be equivalent to commanding."

"Why, of course it would," retorted Mr. Bray, in an exasperated tone. "If you don't happen to have heard of the time, Sir, I tell you that there was a time, when I carried every point in triumph against her mother's whole family, although they had power and wealth on their side—by my will alone."

"Still," rejoined Ralph, as mildly as his nature would allow him, "you have not heard me out. You are a man yet qualified to shine in society, with many years of life before you—that is, if you lived in freer air, and under brighter skies, and chose your own companions. Gaiety is your element, you have shone in it before. Fashion and freedom for you. France, and an annuity that would support you there in luxury, would give you a new lease of life—transfer you to a new existence. The town rang with your expensive pleasures once, and you could blaze upon a new scene again, profiting by experience, and living a little at others' cost, instead of letting others live at yours. What is there on the reverse side of the picture? What is there? I don't know which is the nearest churchyard, but a gravestone there, wherever it is, and a date—perhaps two years hence, perhaps twenty. That's all."

Mr. Bray rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, and shaded his face with his hand.

"I speak plainly," said Ralph, sitting down beside him, "because I feel strongly. It's my interest that you should marry your daughter to my friend Gride, because then he sees me paid—in part, that is. I don't disguise it. I acknowledge it openly. But what interest have you in rec-

ommending her to such a step? Keep that in view. She might object, remonstrate, shed tears, talk of his being too old, and plead that her life would be rendered miserable. But what is it now?"

Several slight gestures on the part of the invalid, showed that these arguments were no more lost upon him, than the smallest iota of his demeanour was upon Ralph.

"What is it now, I say," pursued the wily usurer, "or what has it a chance of being? If you died, indeed, the people you hate would make her happy. But can you bear the thought of that?"

"No!" returned Bray, urged by a vindictive impulse he could not repress.

"I should imagine not, indeed!" said Ralph quietly. "If she profits by anybody's death," this was said in a lower tone, "let it be by her husband's—don't let her have to look back to yours, as the event from which to date a happier life. Where is the objection? Let me hear it stated. What is it? That her suitor is an old man? Why, how often do men of family and fortune, who haven't your excuse, but have all the means and superfluities of life within their reach—how often do they marry their daughters to old men, or (worse still) to young men without heads or hearts, to tickle some idle vanity, strengthen some family interest, or secure some seat in Parliament! Judge for her, Sir, judge for her. You must know best, and she will live to thank you."

"Hush! hush!" cried Mr. Bray, suddenly starting up, and covering Ralph's mouth with his trembling hand. "I hear her at the door!"

There was a gleam of conscience in the shame and terror of this hasty action, which, in one short moment, tore the thin covering of sophistry from the cruel design, and laid it bare in all its meanness and heartless deformity. The father fell into his chair pale and trembling; Arthur Gride plucked and fumbled at his hat, and durst not raise his eyes from the floor; even Ralph crouched for the moment like a beaten hound, cowed by the presence of one young innocent girl!

The effect was almost as brief as sudden. Ralph was the first to recover himself, and observing Madeline's looks of alarm, entreated the poor girl to be composed, assuring her that there was no cause for fear.

"A sudden spasm," said Ralph, glancing at Mr. Bray. "He is quite well now."

It might have moved a very hard and worldly heart to see the young and beautiful creature, whose certain misery they had been contriving but a minute before, throw her arms about her father's neck, and pour forth words of tender sympathy and love, the sweetest a father's ear can know, or child's lips form. But Ralph looked coldly on; and Arthur Gride, whose bleared eyes gloated only over the outward beauties, and were blind to the spirit which reigned within, evinced—a fantastic kind of warmth certainly, but not exactly that kind of warmth of feeling which the contemplation of virtue usually inspires.

"Madeline," said her father, gently disengaging himself, "it was nothing."

"But you had that spasm yesterday, and it is terrible to see you in such pain. Can I do nothing for you?"

"Nothing just now. Here are two gentlemen, Madeline, one of whom you have seen before. She used to say," added Mr. Bray, addressing Arthur Gride, "that the sight of you always made me worse. That was natural, knowing what she did, and only what she did, of our connexion and its results. Well, well. Perhaps she may change her mind on that point; girls have leave to change their minds, you know. You are very tired, my dear."

"I am not, indeed."

"Indeed you are. You do too much."

"I wish I could do more."

"I know you do, but you over-task your strength. This wretched life, my love, of daily labour and fatigue, is more than you can bear, I am sure it is. Poor Madeline!"

With these and many more kind words, Mr. Bray drew his daughter to him and kissed her cheek affectionately. Ralph, watching him sharply and closely in the meantime, made his way towards the door, and signed to Gride to follow him.

"You will communicate with us again?" said Ralph.

"Yes, yes," returned Mr. Bray, hastily thrusting his daughter aside. "In a week. Give me a week."

"One week," said Ralph, turning to his companion, "from to-day. Good morning. Miss Madeline, I kiss your hand."

"We will shake hands, Gride," said Mr. Bray, extend-

ing his, as old Arthur bowed. "You mean well, no doubt. I am bound to say so now. If I owed you money, that was not your fault. Madeline, my love—your hand here."

"Oh dear—If the young lady would condescend—Only the tips of her fingers—" said Arthur, hesitating and half retreating.

Madeline shrank involuntarily from the goblin figure, but she placed the tips of her fingers in his hand and instantly withdrew them. After an ineffectual clutch, intended to detain and carry them to his lips, old Arthur gave his own fingers a mumbling kiss, and with many amorous distortions of visage went in pursuit of his friend, who was by this time in the street.

"What does he say, what does he say,—what does the giant say to the pigmy?" inquired Arthur Gride, hobbling up to Ralph.

"What does the pigmy say to the giant?" rejoined Ralph, elevating his eyebrows and looking down upon his questioner.

"He doesn't know what to say," replied Arthur Gride. "He hopes and fears. But is she not a dainty morsel?"

"I have no great taste for beauty," growled Ralph.

"But I have," rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. "Oh dear! How handsome her eyes looked when she was stooping over him—such long lashes—such delicate fringe! She—she—looked at me so soft."

"Not over-lovingly, I think?" said Ralph. "Did she?"

"Do you think not?" replied old Arthur. "But don't you think it can be brought about—don't you think it can?"

Ralph looked at him with a contemptuous frown, and replied with a sneer, and between his teeth—

"Did you mark his telling her she was tired and did too much, and over-tasked her strength?"

"Ay, ay. What of it?"

"When do you think he ever told her that before? The life is more than she can bear. Yes, yes. He'll change it for her."

"D'ye think it's done?" inquired old Arthur, peering into his companion's face with half-closed eyes.

"I am sure it's done," said Ralph. "He is trying to deceive himself, even before our eyes, already—making believe that he thinks of her good and not his own—acting a

virtuous part, and so considerate and affectionate, Sir, that the daughter scarcely knew him. I saw a tear of surprise in her eye. There'll be a few more tears of surprise there before long, though of a different kind. Oh! we may wait with confidence for this day week."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

BEING FOR THE BENEFIT OF MR. VINCENT CRUMMLES, AND POSITIVELY HIS LAST APPEARANCE ON THIS STAGE.

It was with a very sad and heavy heart, oppressed by many painful ideas, that Nicholas retraced his steps eastward and betook himself to the counting-house of Cheeryble Brothers. Whatever the idle hopes he had suffered himself to entertain, whatever the pleasant visions which had sprung up in his mind and grouped themselves round the fair image of Madeline Bray, they were now dispelled, and not a vestige of their gaiety and brightness remained.

It would be a poor compliment to Nicholas's better nature, and one which he was very far from deserving, to insinuate that the solution, and such a solution, of the mystery which had seemed to surround Madeline Bray, when he was ignorant even of her name, had damped his ardour or cooled the fervour of his admiration. If he had regarded her before, with such a passion as young men attracted by mere beauty and elegance may entertain, he was now conscious of much deeper and stronger feelings. But, reverence for the truth and purity of her heart, respect for the helplessness and loneliness of her situation, sympathy with the trials of one so young and fair, and admiration of her great and noble spirit, all seemed to raise her far above his reach, and, while they imparted new depth and dignity to his love, to whisper that it was hopeless.

"I will keep my word, as I have pledged it to her," said Nicholas manfully. "This is no common trust that I have to discharge, and I will perform the double duty that is imposed upon me most scrupulously and strictly. My secret feelings deserve no consideration in such a case as this, and they shall have none."

Still, there were the secret feelings in existence just the same, and in secret Nicholas rather encouraged them than otherwise; reasoning (if he reasoned at all!) that there they could do no harm to anybody but himself, and that if he kept them to himself from a sense of duty, he had an additional right to entertain himself with them as a reward for his heroism.

All these thoughts, coupled with what he had seen that morning and the anticipation of his next visit, rendered him a very dull and abstracted companion; so much so, indeed, that Tim Linkinwater suspected he must have made the mistake of a figure somewhere, which was preying upon his mind, and seriously conjured him, if such were the case, to make a clean breast and scratch it out, rather than have his whole life embittered by the tortures of remorse.

But in reply to these considerate representations, and many others both from Tim and Mr. Frank, Nicholas could only be brought to state that he was never merrier in his life; and so went on all day, and so went towards home at night, still turning over and over again the same subjects, thinking over and over again the same things, and arriving over and over again at the same conclusions.

In this pensive, wayward, and uncertain state, people are apt to lounge and loiter without knowing why, to read placards on the walls with great attention and without the smallest idea of one word of their contents, and to stare most earnestly through shop-windows at things which they don't see. It was thus that Nicholas found himself poring with the utmost interest over a large play-bill hanging outside a minor theatre which he had to pass on his way home, and reading a list of the actors and actresses who had promised to do honour to some approaching benefit, with as much gravity as if it had been a catalogue of the names of those ladies and gentlemen who stood highest upon the Book of Fate, and he had been looking anxiously for his own. He glanced at the top of the bill, with a smile at his own dulness, as he prepared to resume his walk, and there saw announced, in large letters with a large space between each of them, "Positively the last appearance of Mr. Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity!!!"

"Nonsense!" said Nicholas, turning back again. "It can't be."

But there it was. In one line by itself was an announce-

ment of the first night of a new melo-drama; in another line by itself was an announcement of the last six nights of an old one; a third line was devoted to the re-engagement of the unrivalled African Knife-swallower, who had kindly suffered himself to be prevailed upon to forego his country engagements for one week longer; a fourth line announced that Mr. Snittle Timberry, having recovered from his late severe indisposition, would have the honour of appearing that evening; a fifth line said that there were "Cheers, Tears, and Laughter!" every night; a sixth, that that was positively the last appearance of Mr. Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity.

"Surely it must be the same man," thought Nicholas. "There can't be two Vincent Crummleses."

The better to settle this question he referred to the bill again, and finding that there was a Baron in the first piece, and that Roberto (his son) was enacted by one Master Crummles, and Spaletro (his nephew) by one Master Percy Crummles—*their* last appearances—and that, incidental to the piece, was a characteristic dance by the characters, and a castanet pas seul by the Infant Phenomenon—*her* last appearance—he no longer entertained any doubt; and presenting himself at the stage door, and sending in a scrap of paper with "Mr. Johnson" written thereon in pencil, was presently conducted by a Robber, with a very large belt and buckle round his waist, and very large leather gauntlets on his hands, into the presence of his former manager.

Mr. Crummles was unfeignedly glad to see him, and starting up from before a small dressing-glass, with one very bushy eyebrow stuck on crooked over his left eye, and the fellow eyebrow and the calf of one of his legs in his hand, embraced him cordially; at the same time observing, that it would do Mrs. Crummles's heart good to bid him good-bye before they went.

"You were always a favourite of hers, Johnson," said Crummles, "always were from the first. I was quite easy in my mind about you from that first day you dined with us. One that Mrs. Crummles took a fancy to, was sure to turn out right. Ah! Johnson, what a woman that is!"

"I am sincerely obliged to her for her kindness in this and all other respects," said Nicholas. "But where are you going, that you talk about bidding good-bye?"

"Haven't you seen it in the papers?" said Crummles, with some dignity.

"No," replied Nicholas.

"I wonder at that," said the manager. "It was among the varieties. I had the paragraph here somewhere—but I don't know—oh, yes, here it is."

So saying, Mr. Crummles, after pretending that he thought he must have lost it, produced a square inch of newspaper from the pocket of the pantaloons he wore in private life (which, together with the plain clothes of several other gentlemen, lay scattered about on a kind of dresser in the room), and gave it to Nicholas to read:—

"The talented Vincent Crummles, long favourably known to fame as a country manager and actor of no ordinary pretensions, is about to cross the Atlantic on a histrionic expedition. Crummles is to be accompanied, we hear, by his lady and gifted family. We know no man superior to Crummles in his particular line of character, or one who, whether as a public or private individual, could carry with him the best wishes of a larger circle of friends. Crummles is certain to succeed."

"Here's another bit," said Mr. Crummles, handing over a still smaller scrap. "This is from the notices to correspondents, this one."

Nicholas read it aloud. "'Philo-Dramaticus.—Crummles, the country manager and actor, cannot be more than forty-three, or forty-four years of age. Crummles is NOT a Prussian, having been born at Chelsea.' Humph!" said Nicholas, "that's an odd paragraph."

"Very," returned Crummles, scratching the side of his nose, and looking at Nicholas with an assumption of great unconcern. "I can't think who puts these things in. *I* didn't."

Still keeping his eye on Nicholas, Mr. Crummles shook his head twice or thrice with profound gravity, and remarking, that he could not for the life of him imagine how the newspapers found out the things they did, folded up the extracts and put them in his pocket again.

"I am astonished to hear this news," said Nicholas. "Going to America! You had no such thing in contemplation when I was with you."

"No," replied Crummles, "I hadn't then. The fact is, that Mrs. Crummles—most extraordinary woman, John-

son"—here he broke off and whispered something in his ear.

"Oh!" said Nicholas, smiling. "The prospect of an addition to your family?"

"The seventh addition, Johnson," returned Mr. Crummles, solemnly. "I thought such a child as the Phenomenon must have been a closer; but it seems we are to have another. She is a very remarkable woman."

"I congratulate you," said Nicholas, "and I hope this may prove a phenomenon too."

"Why, it's pretty sure to be something uncommon, I suppose," rejoined Mr. Crummles. "The talent of the other three is principally in combat and serious pantomime. I should like this one to have a turn for juvenile tragedy; I understand they want something of that sort in America very much. However, we must take it as it comes. Perhaps it may have a genius for the tight-rope. It may have any sort of genius, in short, if it takes after its mother, Johnson, for she is an universal genius; but, whatever its genius is, that genius shall be developed."

Expressing himself after these terms, Mr. Crummles put on his other eyebrow, and the calves on his legs, and then put on his legs, which were of a yellowish flesh-colour, and rather soiled about the knees, from frequent going down upon those joints, in curses, prayers, last struggles, and other strong passages.

While the ex-manager completed his toilet, he informed Nicholas that as he should have a fair start in America, from the proceeds of a tolerably good engagement which he had been fortunate enough to obtain, and as he and Mrs. Crummles could scarcely hope to act for ever—not being immortal, except in the breath of Fame and in a figurative sense—he had made up his mind to settle there permanently, in the hope of acquiring some land of his own which would support them in their old age, and which they could afterwards bequeath to their children. Nicholas, having highly commended this resolution, Mr. Crummles went on to impart such further intelligence relative to their mutual friends as he thought might prove interesting; informing Nicholas, among other things, that Miss Snevellicci was happily married to an affluent young wax-chandler who had supplied the theatre with candles, and that Mr. Lillyvick didn't dare to say his soul was his own, such was the tyran-

nical sway of Mrs. Lillyvick, who reigned paramount and supreme.

Nicholas responded to this confidence on the part of Mr. Crummles, by confiding to him his own name, situation, and prospects, and informing him in as few general words as he could, of the circumstances which had led to their first acquaintance. After congratulating him with great heartiness on the improved state of his fortunes, Mr. Crummles gave him to understand that next morning he and his were to start for Liverpool, where the vessel lay which was to carry them from the shores of England, and that if Nicholas wished to take a last adieu of Mrs. Crummles, he must repair with him that night to a farewell-supper, given in honour of the family at a neighbouring tavern; at which Mr. Snittle Timberry would preside, while the honours of the vice-chair would be sustained by the African Swallower.

The room being by this time very warm and somewhat crowded, in consequence of the influx of four gentlemen, who had just killed each other in the piece under representation, Nicholas accepted the invitation, and promised to return at the conclusion of the performances; preferring the cool air and twilight out of doors to the mingled perfume of gas, orange-peel, and gunpowder, which pervaded the hot and glaring theatre.

He availed himself of this interval to buy a silver snuff-box—the best his funds would afford—as a token of remembrance for Mr. Crummles, and having purchased besides a pair of ear-rings for Mrs. Crummles, a necklace for the Phenomenon, and a flaming shirt-pin for each of the young gentlemen, he refreshed himself with a walk, and returning a little after the appointed time, found the lights out, the theatre empty, the curtain raised for the night, and Mr. Crummles walking up and down the stage expecting his arrival.

"Timberry won't be long," said Mr. Crummles. "He played the audience out to-night. He does a faithful black in the last piece, and it takes him a little longer to wash himself."

"A very unpleasant line of character, I should think?" said Nicholas.

"No, I don't know," replied Mr. Crummles; "it comes off easily enough, and there's only the face and neck. We

had a first-tragedy man in our company once, who, when he played Othello, used to black himself all over. But that's feeling a part and going into it as if you meant it; it isn't usual—more's the pity."

Mr. Snittle Timberry now appeared, arm in arm with the African Swallower, and, being introduced to Nicholas, raised his hat half-a-foot, and said he was proud to know him. The Swallower said the same, and looked and spoke remarkably like an Irishman.

"I see by the bills that you have been ill, Sir," said Nicholas to Mr. Timberry. "I hope you are none the worse for your exertions to-night?"

Mr. Timberry in reply, shook his head with a gloomy air, tapped his chest several times with great significancy, and drawing his cloak more closely about him, said, "But no matter—no matter. Come!"

It is observable that when people upon the stage are in any strait involving the very last extremity of weakness and exhaustion, they invariably perform feats of strength requiring great ingenuity and muscular power. Thus, a wounded prince or bandit-chief, who is bleeding to death and too faint to move, except to the softest music (and then only upon his hands and knees), shall be seen to approach a cottage door for aid, in such a series of writhings and twistings, and with such curlings up of the legs, and such rollings over and over, and such gettings up and tumblings down again, as could never be achieved save by a very strong man skilled in posture-making. And so natural did this sort of performance come to Mr. Snittle Timberry, that on their way out of the theatre and towards the tavern where the supper was to be holden, he testified the severity of his recent indisposition and its wasting effects upon the nervous system, by a series of gymnastic performances which were the admiration of all witnesses.

"Why this is indeed a joy I had not looked for!" said Mrs. Crummles, when Nicholas was presented.

"Nor I," replied Nicholas. "It is by mere chance that I have this opportunity of seeing you, although I would have made a great exertion to have availed myself of it."

"Here is one whom you know," said Mrs. Crummles, thrusting forward the Phenomenon in a blue gauze frock, extensively flounced, and trousers of the same; "and here

another—and another," presenting the Masters Crummleses.

"And how is your friend, the faithful Digby?"

"Digby!" said Nicholas, forgetting at the instant that this had been Smike's theatrical name. "Oh yes. He's quite—what am I saying?—he is very far from well."

"How!" exclaimed Mrs. Crummles, with a tragic recoil.

"I fear," said Nicholas, shaking his head, and making an attempt to smile, "that your better-half would be more struck with him now, than ever."

"What mean you?" rejoined Mrs. Crummles, in her most popular manner. "Whence comes this altered tone?"

"I mean that a dastardly enemy of mine has struck at me through him, and that while he thinks to torture me, he inflicts on him such agonies of terror and suspense as—— You will excuse me, I am sure," said Nicholas, checking himself. "I should never speak of this, and never do, except to those who know the facts, but for a moment I forgot myself."

With this hasty apology Nicholas stooped down to salute the Phenomenon, and changed the subject; inwardly cursing his precipitation, and very much wondering what Mrs. Crummles must think of so sudden an explosion.

That lady seemed to think very little about it, for the supper being by this time on table, she gave her hand to Nicholas and repaired with a stately step to the left hand of Mr. Snittle Timberry. Nicholas had the honour to support her, and Mr. Crummles was placed upon the chairman's right; the Phenomenon and the Masters Crummleses sustained the vice.

The company amounted in number to some twenty-five or thirty, being composed of such members of the theatrical profession, then engaged or disengaged in London, as were numbered among the most intimate friends of Mr. and Mrs. Crummles. The ladies and gentlemen were pretty equally balanced; the expenses of the entertainment being defrayed by the latter, each of whom had the privilege of inviting one of the former as his guest.

It was upon the whole a very distinguished party, for independently of the lesser theatrical lights who clustered on this occasion round Mr. Snittle Timberry, there was a literary gentleman present who had dramatised in his time two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they had

come out—some of them faster than they had come out—and *was* a literary gentleman in consequence.

This gentleman sat on the left hand of Nicholas, to whom he was introduced by his friend the African Swallower, from the bottom of the table, with a high eulogium upon his fame and reputation.

"I am happy to know a gentleman of such great distinction," said Nicholas, politely.

"Sir," replied the wit, "you're very welcome, I'm sure. The honour is reciprocal, Sir, as I usually say when I dramatise a book. Did you ever hear a definition of fame, Sir?"

"I have heard several," replied Nicholas, with a smile. "What is yours?"

"When I dramatise a book, Sir," said the literary gentleman, "*that's* fame—for its author."

"Oh, indeed!" rejoined Nicholas.

"That's fame, Sir," said the literary gentleman.

"So Richard Turpin, Tom King, and Jerry Abershaw have handed down to fame the names of those on whom they committed their most impudent robberies?" said Nicholas.

"I don't know anything about that, Sir," answered the literary gentleman.

"Shakespeare dramatised stories which had previously appeared in print, it is true," observed Nicholas.

"Meaning Bill, Sir?" said the literary gentleman. "So he did. Bill was an adapter, certainly, so he was—and very well he adapted too—considering."

"I was about to say," rejoined Nicholas, "that Shakespeare derived some of his plots from old tales and legends in general circulation; but it seems to me, that some of the gentlemen of your craft at the present day, have shot very far beyond him—"

"You're quite right, Sir," interrupted the literary gentleman, leaning back in his chair and exercising his toothpick. "Human intellect, Sir, has progressed since his time—is progressing—will progress—"

"Shot beyond him, I mean," resumed Nicholas, "in quite another respect, for, whereas he brought within the magic circle of his genius, traditions peculiarly adapted for his purpose, and turned familiar things into constellations which should enlighten the world for ages, you drag within the magic circle of your dulness, subjects not at all adapted

to the purposes of the stage, and debase as he exalted. For instance, you take the uncompleted books of living authors, fresh from their hands, wet from the press, cut, hack, and carve them to the powers and capacities of your actors, and the capability of your theatres, finish unfinished works, hastily and crudely vamp up ideas not yet worked out by their original projector, but which have doubtless cost him many thoughtful days and sleepless nights; by a comparison of incidents and dialogue, down to the very last word he may have written a fortnight before, do your utmost to anticipate his plot—all this without his permission, and against his will; and then, to crown the whole proceeding, publish in some mean pamphlet an unmeaning farrago of garbled extracts from his work, to which you put your name as author, with the honourable distinction annexed, of having perpetrated a hundred other outrages of the same description. Now, show me the distinction between such pilfering as this, and picking a man's pocket in the street; unless, indeed, it be, that the legislature has a regard for pocket handkerchiefs, and leaves men's brains, except when they are knocked out by violence, to take care of themselves."

"Men must live, Sir," said the literary gentleman, shrugging his shoulders.

"That would be an equally fair plea in both cases," replied Nicholas; "but if you put it upon that ground, I have nothing more to say, than, that if I were a writer of books, and you a thirsty dramatist, I would rather pay your tavern score for six months—large as it might be—than have a niche in the Temple of Fame with you for the humblest corner of my pedestal, through six hundred generations."

The conversation threatened to take a somewhat angry tone when it had arrived thus far, but Mrs. Crummles opportunely interposed to prevent its leading to any violent outbreak, by making some inquiries of the literary gentleman relative to the plots of the six new pieces which he had written by contract to introduce the African Knife-swallower in his various unrivalled performances. This speedily engaged him in an animated conversation with that lady, in the interest of which, all recollection of his recent discussion with Nicholas very quickly evaporated.

The board being now clear of the more substantial arti-

cles of food, and punch, wine, and spirits being placed upon it and handed about, the guests, who had been previously conversing in little groups of three or four, gradually fell off into a dead silence, while the majority of those present, glanced from time to time at Mr. Snittle Timberry, and the bolder spirits did not even hesitate to strike the table with their knuckles, and plainly intimate their expectations, by uttering such encouragements as "Now, Tim," "Wake up, Mr. Chairman," "All charged, Sir, and waiting for a toast," and so forth.

To these remonstrances, Mr. Timberry deigned no other rejoinder than striking his chest and gasping for breath, and giving many other indications of being still the victim of indisposition—for a man must not make himself too cheap either on the stage or off—while Mr. Crummles, who knew full well that he would be the subject of the forthcoming toast, sat gracefully in his chair with his arm thrown carelessly over the back, and now and then lifted his glass to his mouth and drank a little punch, with the same air with which he was accustomed to take long draughts of nothing, out of the pasteboard goblets in banquet scenes.

At length Mr. Snittle Timberry rose in the most approved attitude, with one hand in the breast of his waistcoat and the other on the nearest snuff-box, and having been received with great enthusiasm, proposed, with abundance of quotations, his friend Mr. Vincent Crummles: ending a pretty long speech by extending his right hand on one side and his left on the other, and severally calling upon Mr. and Mrs. Crummles to grasp the same. This done, Mr. Vincent Crummles returned thanks, and that done, the African Swallower proposed Mrs. Vincent Crummles, in affecting terms. Then were heard loud moans and sobs from Mrs. Crummles and the ladies, despite of which that heroic woman insisted upon returning thanks herself, which she did, in a manner and in a speech which has never been surpassed and seldom equalled. It then became the duty of Mr. Snittle Timberry to give the young Crummleses, which he did; after which Mr. Vincent Crummles, as their father, addressed the company in a supplementary speech, enlarging on their virtues, amiabilities, and excellences, and wishing that they were the sons and daughter of every lady and gentleman present. These solemnities having been succeeded by a decent interval, enlivened by musical and

other entertainments, Mr. Crummles proposed that ornament of the profession, Mr. Snittle Timberry; and at a little later period of the evening, the health of that other ornament of the profession, the African Swallower—his very dear friend, if he would allow him to call him so; which liberty (there being no particular reason why he should not allow it) the African Swallower graciously permitted. The literary gentleman was then about to be drunk, but it being discovered that he had been drunk for some time in another acceptation of the term, and was then asleep on the stairs, the intention was abandoned, and the honour transferred to the ladies. Finally, after a very long sitting, Mr. Snittle Timberry vacated the chair, and the company with many adieus and embraces dispersed.

Nicholas waited to the last to give his little presents. When he had said good-bye all round and came to Mr. Crummles, he could not but mark the difference between their present separation and their parting at Portsmouth. Not a jot of his theatrical manner remained; he put out his hand with an air which, if he could have summoned it at will, would have made him the best actor of his day in homely parts, and when Nicholas shook it with the warmth he honestly felt, appeared thoroughly melted.

"We were a very happy little company, Johnson," said poor Crummles. "You and I never had a word. I shall be very glad to-morrow morning to think that I saw you again, but now I almost wish you hadn't come."

Nicholas was about to return a cheerful reply, when he was greatly disconcerted by the sudden apparition of Mrs. Grudden, who it seemed had declined to attend the supper in order that she might rise earlier in the morning, and who now burst out of an adjoining bedroom, habited in very extraordinary white robes: and throwing her arms about his neck, hugged him with great affection.

"What! Are you going too?" said Nicholas, submitting with as good a grace as if she had been the finest young creature in the world.

"Going?" returned Mrs. Grudden. "Lord ha' mercy, what do you think they'd do without me?"

Nicholas submitted to another hug with even a better grace than before, if that were possible, and waving his hat as cheerfully as he could, took farewell of the Vincent Crummleses.

CHAPTER XLIX.

CHRONICLES THE FURTHER PROCEEDINGS OF THE NICKLEBY FAMILY, AND THE SEQUEL OF THE ADVENTURE OF THE GENTLEMAN IN THE SMALL-CLOTHES.

While Nicholas, absorbed in the one engrossing subject of interest which had recently opened upon him, occupied his leisure hours with thoughts of Madeline Bray, and, in execution of the commissions which the anxiety of brother Charles in her behalf imposed upon him, saw her again and again, and each time with greater danger to his peace of mind and a more weakening effect upon the lofty resolutions he had formed, Mrs. Nickleby and Kate continued to live in peace and quiet, agitated by no other cares than those which were connected with certain harassing proceedings taken by Mr. Snawley for the recovery of his son, and their anxiety for Smike himself, whose health, long upon the wane, began to be so much affected by apprehension and uncertainty as sometimes to occasion both them and Nicholas considerable uneasiness, and even alarm.

It was no complaint or murmur on the part of the poor fellow himself that thus disturbed them. Ever eager to be employed in such slight services as he could render, and always anxious to repay his benefactors with cheerful and happy looks, less friendly eyes might have seen in him no cause for any misgiving. But there were times—and often too—when the sunken eye was too bright, the hollow cheek too flushed, the breath too thick and heavy in its course, the frame too feeble and exhausted, to escape their regard and notice.

There is a dread disease which so prepares its victim, as it were, for death; which so refines it of its grosser aspect, and throws around familiar looks unearthly indications of the coming change—a dread disease, in which the struggle between soul and body is so gradual, quiet, and solemn, and the result so sure, that day by day, and grain by grain, the mortal part wastes and withers away, so that the spirit

grows light and sanguine with its lightening load, and, feeling immortality at hand, deems it but a new term of mortal life—a disease in which death and life are so strangely blended, that death takes the glow and hue of life, and life the gaunt and grisly form of death—a disease which medicine never cured, wealth warded off, or poverty could boast exemption from—which sometimes moves in giant strides, and sometimes at a tardy sluggish pace, but, slow or quick, is ever sure and certain.

It was with some faint reference in his own mind to this disorder, though he would by no means admit it, even to himself, that Nicholas had already carried his faithful companion to a physician of great repute. There was no cause for immediate alarm, he said. There were no present symptoms which could be deemed conclusive. The constitution had been greatly tried and injured in childhood, but still it *might* not be—and that was all.

But he seemed to grow no worse, and, as it was not difficult to find a reason for these symptoms of illness in the shock and agitation he had recently undergone, Nicholas comforted himself with the hope that his poor friend would soon recover. This hope his mother and sister shared with him; and as the object of their joint solicitude seemed to have no uneasiness or despondency for himself, but each day answered with a quiet smile that he felt better than he had upon the day before, their fears abated, and the general happiness was by degrees restored.

Many and many a time in after years did Nicholas look back to this period of his life, and tread again the humble quiet homely scenes that rose up as of old before him. Many and many a time, in the twilight of a summer evening, or beside the flickering winter's fire—but not so often or so sadly then—would his thoughts wander back to these old days, and dwell with a pleasant sorrow upon every slight remembrance which they brought crowding home. The little room in which they had so often sat long after it was dark, figuring such happy futures; Kate's cheerful voice and merry laugh; how, if she were from home they used to sit and watch for her return, scarcely breaking silence but to say how dull it seemed without her; the glee with which poor Smike would start from the darkened corner where he used to sit, and hurry to admit her; and the tears they often saw upon his face, half wondering to see

them too and he so pleased and happy; every little incident, and even slight words and looks of those old days, little heeded then, but well remembered when busy cares and trials were quite forgot; came fresh and thick before him many and many a time, and, rustling above the dusty growth of years, came back green boughs of yesterday.

But there were other persons associated with these recollections, and many changes came about before they had being—a necessary reflection for the purposes of these adventures, which at once subside into their accustomed train, and shunning all flighty anticipations or wayward wanderings, pursue their steady and decorous course.

If the Brothers Cheeryble, as they found Nicholas worthy of trust and confidence, bestowed upon him every day some new and substantial mark of kindness, they were not less mindful of those who depended on him. Various little presents to Mrs. Nickleby—always of the very things they most required—tended in no slight degree to the improvement and embellishment of the cottage. Kate's little store of trinkets became quite dazzling; and for company—! If brother Charles and brother Ned failed to look in for at least a few minutes every Sunday, or one evening in the week, there was Mr. Tim Linkinwater (who had never made half-a-dozen other acquaintances in all his life, and who took such delight in his new friends as no words can express) constantly coming and going in his evening walks, and stopping to rest; while Mr. Frank Cheeryble happened, by some strange conjunction of circumstances, to be passing the door on some business or other at least three nights in the week.

"He is the most attentive young man *I* ever saw, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby to her daughter, one evening when this last-named gentleman had been the subject of the worthy lady's eulogium for some time, and Kate had sat perfectly silent.

"Attentive, mama!" rejoined Kate.

"Bless my heart, Kate!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with her wonted suddenness, "what a colour you have got; why, you're quite flushed!"

"Oh, mama! what strange things you fancy."

"It wasn't fancy, Kate, my dear, I'm certain of that," returned her mother. "However, it's gone now at any rate, so it don't much matter whether it was or not. What

was it we were talking about? Oh! Mr. Frank. I never saw such attention in *my* life, never."

"Surely you are not serious," returned Kate, colouring again; and this time beyond all dispute.

"Not serious!" returned Mrs. Nickleby; "why shouldn't I be serious? I'm sure I never was more serious. I will say that his politeness and attention to me is one of the most becoming, gratifying, pleasant things I have seen for a very long time. You don't often meet with such behaviour in young men, and it strikes one more when one does meet with it."

"Oh! attention to *you*, mama," rejoined Kate quickly —"oh yes."

"Dear me, Kate," retorted Mrs. Nickleby, "what an extraordinary girl you are. Was it likely I should be talking of his attention to anybody else? I declare I'm quite sorry to think he should be in love with a German lady, that I am."

"He said very positively that it was no such thing, mama," returned Kate. "Don't you remember his saying so that very first night he came here? Besides," she added, in a more gentle tone, "why should *we* be sorry if it is the case? What is it to us, mama?"

"Nothing to *us*, Kate, perhaps," said Mrs. Nickleby emphatically; "but something to *me*, I confess. I like English people to be thorough English people, and not half English and half I don't know what. I shall tell him point-blank next time he comes, that I wish he would marry one of his own countrywomen; and see what he says to that."

"Pray don't think of such a thing, mama," returned Kate hastily; "not for the world. Consider — how very——"

"Well, my dear, how very what!" said Mrs. Nickleby, opening her eyes in great astonishment.

Before Kate had returned any reply, a queer little double-knock announced that Miss La Creevy had called to see them; and when Miss La Creevy presented herself, Mrs. Nickleby, though strongly disposed to be argumentative on the previous question, forgot all about it in a gush of supposes about the coach she had come by; supposing that the man who drove must have been either the man in the shirt-sleeves or the man with the black eye; that whoever he

was, he hadn't found that parasol she left inside last week; that no doubt they had stopped a long while at the Half-way House, coming down; or that perhaps being full, they had come straight on; and lastly, that they surely must have passed Nicholas on the road.

"I saw nothing of him," answered Miss La Creevy; "but I saw that dear old soul Mr. Linkinwater."

"Taking his evening walk, and coming on to rest here before he turns back to the City, I'll be bound!" said Mrs. Nickleby.

"I should think he was," returned Miss La Creevy, "especially as young Mr. Cheeryble was with him."

"Surely that is no reason why Mr. Linkinwater should be coming here," said Kate.

"Why I think it is, my dear," said Miss La Creevy. "For a young man, Mr. Frank is not a very great walker; and I observe that he generally falls tired, and requires a good long rest, when he has come as far as this. But where is my friend?" said the little woman, looking about, after having glanced slyly at Kate. "He has not been run away with again, has he?"

"Ah! where is Mr. Smike?" said Mrs. Nickleby; "he was here this instant."

Upon further inquiry, it turned out, to the good lady's unbounded astonishment, that Smike had that moment gone up stairs to bed.

"Well now," said Mrs. Nickleby, "he is the strangest creature! Last Tuesday—was it Tuesday? Yes, to be sure it was; you recollect, Kate, my dear, the very last time young Mr. Cheeryble was here—last Tuesday night he went off in just the same strange way, at the very moment the knock came to the door. It cannot be that he don't like company, because he is always fond of people who are fond of Nicholas, and I am sure young Mr. Cheeryble is. And the strangest thing is, that he does not go to bed; therefore it cannot be because he is tired. I know he doesn't go to bed, because my room is the next one, and when I went up-stairs last Tuesday, hours after him, I found that he had not even taken his shoes off; and he had no candle, so he must have sat moping in the dark all the time. Now, upon my word," said Mrs. Nickleby, "when I come to think of it, that's very extraordinary!"

As the hearers did not echo this sentiment, but remained

profoundly silent, either as not knowing what to say, or as being unwilling to interrupt, Mrs. Nickleby pursued the thread of her discourse after her own fashion.

"I hope," said that lady, "that this unaccountable conduct may not be the beginning of his taking to his bed and living there all his life, like the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury, or the Cock-lane Ghost, or some of those extraordinary creatures. One of them had some connexion with our family. I forget, without looking back to some old letters I have up-stairs, whether it was my great-grandfather who went to school with the Cock-lane Ghost, or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury who went to school with my grandmother. Miss La Creevy, you know, of course. Which was it that didn't mind what the clergyman said? The Cock-lane Ghost or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury?"

"The Cock-lane Ghost, I believe."

"Then I have no doubt," said Mrs. Nickleby, "that it was with him my great-grandfather went to school; for I know the master of his school was a Dissenter, and that would in a great measure account for the Cock-lane Ghost's behaving in such an improper manner to the clergyman when he grew up. Ah! Train up a Ghost—child, I mean——"

Any further reflections on this fruitful theme were abruptly cut short by the arrival of Tim Linkinwater and Mr. Frank Cheeryble; in the hurry of receiving whom, Mrs. Nickleby speedily lost sight of everything else.

"I am so sorry Nicholas is not at home," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Kate, my dear, you must be both Nicholas and yourself."

"Miss Nickleby need be but herself," said Frank. "I—if I may venture to say so—oppose all change in her."

"Then at all events she shall press you to stay," returned Mrs. Nickleby. "Mr. Linkinwater says ten minutes, but I cannot let you go so soon; Nicholas would be very much vexed, I am sure. Kate, my dear——"

In obedience to a great number of nods and winks and frowns of extra significance, Kate added her entreaties that the visitors would remain; but it was observable that she addressed them exclusively to Tim Linkinwater; and there was, besides, a certain embarrassment in her manner, which, although it was as far from impairing its graceful character as the tinge it communicated to her cheek was

from diminishing her beauty, was obvious at a glance even to Mrs. Nickleby. Not being of a very speculative character, however, save under circumstances when her speculations could be put into words and uttered aloud, that discreet matron attributed the emotion to the circumstance of her daughter's not happening to have her best frock on—"though I never saw her look better, certainly," she reflected at the same time. Having settled the question in this way, and being most complacently satisfied that in this, as in all other instances, her conjecture could not fail to be the right one, Mrs. Nickleby dismissed it from her thoughts, and inwardly congratulated herself on being so shrewd and knowing.

Nicholas did not come home, nor did Smike re-appear; but neither circumstance, to say the truth, had any great effect upon the little party, who were all in the best humour possible. Indeed, there sprang up quite a flirtation between Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater, who said a thousand jocose and facetious things, and became, by degrees, quite gallant, not to say tender. Little Miss La Creevy on her part was in high spirits, and rallied Tim on having remained a bachelor all his life, with so much success, that Tim was actually induced to declare, that if he could get anybody to have him, he didn't know but what he might change his condition even yet. Miss La Creevy earnestly recommended a lady she knew who would exactly suit Mr. Linkinwater, and had a very comfortable property of her own; but this latter qualification had very little effect upon Tim, who manfully protested that fortune would be no object with him, but that true worth and cheerfulness of disposition were what a man should look for in a wife, and that if he had these he could find money enough for the moderate wants of both. This avowal was considered so honourable to Tim, that neither Mrs. Nickleby nor Miss La Creevy could sufficiently extol it; and stimulated by their praises, Tim launched out into several other declarations also manifesting the disinterestedness of his heart, and a great devotion to the fair sex, which were received with no less approbation. This was done and said with a comical mixture of jest and earnest, and, leading to a great amount of laughter, made them very merry indeed.

Kate was commonly the life and soul of the conversation at home; but she was more silent than usual upon this oc-

casion—perhaps because Tim and Miss La Creevy engrossed so much of it—and, keeping aloof from the talkers, sat at the window watching the shadows as the evening closed in, and enjoying the quiet beauty of the night, which seemed to have scarcely less attractions for Frank, who first lingered near and then sat down beside her. No doubt there are a great many things to be said appropriate to a summer evening, and no doubt they are best said in a low voice, as being most suitable to the peace and serenity of the hour; long pauses, too, at times, and then an earnest word or so, and then another interval of silence which somehow does not seem like silence either, and perhaps now and then a hasty turning away of the head, or drooping of the eyes towards the ground—all these minor circumstances, with a disinclination to have candles introduced and a tendency to confuse hours with minutes, are doubtless mere influences of the time, as many lovely lips can clearly testify. Neither is there the slightest reason why Mrs. Nickleby should have expressed surprise when—candles being at length brought in—Kate's bright eyes were unable to bear the light which obliged her to avert her face, and even to leave the room for some short time; because when one has sat in the dark so long, candles *are* dazzling, and nothing can be more strictly natural than that such results should be produced, as all well-informed young people know. For that matter, old people know it too or did know it once, but they forget these things sometimes, and more's the pity.

The good lady's surprise, however, did not end here. It was greatly increased when it was discovered that Kate had not the least appetite for supper: a discovery so alarming that there is no knowing in what unaccountable efforts of oratory Mrs. Nickleby's apprehensions might have been vented, if the general attention had not been attracted at the moment by a very strange and uncommon noise, proceeding, as the pale and trembling servant-girl affirmed, and as everybody's sense of hearing seemed to affirm also, "right down" the chimney of the adjoining room.

It being quite plain to the comprehension of all present that, however extraordinary and improbable it might appear, the noise did nevertheless proceed from the chimney in question; and the noise (which was a strange compound of various shuffling, sliding, rumbling, and struggling sounds, all muffled by the chimney) still continuing, Frank

Cheeryble caught up a candle, and Tim Linkinwater the tongs, and they would have very quickly ascertained the cause of this disturbance if Mrs. Nickleby had not been taken very faint, and declined being left behind on any account. This produced a short remonstrance, which terminated in their all proceeding to the troubled chamber in a body, excepting only Miss La Creevy, who, as the servant-girl volunteered a confession of having been subject to fits in her infancy, remained with her to give the alarm and apply restoratives, in case of extremity.

Advancing to the door of the mysterious apartment, they were not a little surprised to hear a human voice, chaunting with a highly elaborated expression of melancholy, and in tones of suffocation which a human voice might have produced from under five or six feather-beds of the best quality, the once popular air of "Has she then failed in her truth, the beautiful maid I adore!" Nor, on bursting into the room without demanding a parley, was their astonishment lessened by the discovery that these romantic sounds certainly proceeded from the throat of some man up the chimney, of whom nothing was visible but a pair of legs, which were dangling above the grate, apparently feeling with extreme anxiety for the top bar whereon to effect a landing.

A sight so unusual and unbusiness-like as this completely paralysed Tim Linkinwater, who, after one or two gentle pinches at the stranger's ankles, which were productive of no effect, stood clapping the tongs together as if he were sharpening them for another assault, and did nothing else.

"This must be some drunken fellow," said Frank. "No thief would announce his presence thus."

As he said this with great indignation, he raised the candle to obtain a better view of the legs, and was darting forward to pull them down with very little ceremony, when Mrs. Nickleby, clasping her hands, uttered a sharp sound something between a scream and an exclamation, and demanded to know whether the mysterious limbs were not clad in small-clothes and grey worsted stockings, or whether her eyes had deceived her.

"Yes," cried Frank, looking a little closer. "Small-clothes certainly, and—and—rough grey stockings, too. Do you know him, ma'am?"

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, deliberately sit-

ting herself down in a chair with that sort of desperate resignation which seemed to imply that now matters had come to a crisis, and all disguise was useless, "you will have the goodness, my love, to explain precisely how this matter stands. I have given him no encouragement—none whatever—not the least in the world. You know that, my dear, perfectly well. He was very respectful—exceedingly respectful—when he declared, as you were a witness to; still at the same time, if I am to be persecuted in this way, if vegetable what's-his-names and all kinds of garden-stuff are to strew my path out of doors, and gentlemen are to come choking up our chimneys at home, I really don't know —upon my word I do *not* know—what is to become of me. It's a very hard case—harder than anything I was ever exposed to before I married your poor dear papa, though I suffered a good deal of annoyance then—but that, of course, I expected, and made up my mind for. When I was not nearly so old as you, my dear, there was a young gentleman who sat next us at church, who used almost every Sunday to cut my name in large letters in the front of his pew while the sermon was going on. It was gratifying, of course, naturally so, but still it was an annoyance, because the pew was in a very conspicuous place, and he was several times publicly taken out by the beadle for doing it. But that was nothing to this. This is a great deal worse, and a great deal more embarrassing. I would rather, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, with great solemnity, and an effusion of tears—"I would rather, I declare, have been a pig-faced lady, than be exposed to such a life as this!"

Frank Cheeryble and Tim Linkinwater looked, in irrepressible astonishment, first at each other and then at Kate, who felt that some explanation was necessary, but who, between her terror at the apparition of the legs, her fear lest their owner should be smothered, and her anxiety to give the least ridiculous solution of the mystery that it was capable of bearing, was quite unable to utter a single word.

"He gives me great pain," continued Mrs. Nickleby, drying her eyes—"great pain; but don't hurt a hair of his head, I beg. On no account hurt a hair of his head."

It would not, under existing circumstances, have been quite so easy to hurt a hair of the gentleman's head as Mrs.

Nickleby seemed to imagine, inasmuch as that part of his person was some feet up the chimney, which was by no means a wide one. But as all this time he had never left off singing about the bankruptcy of the beautiful maid in respect of truth, and now began not only to croak very feebly, but to kick with great violence as if respiration became a task of difficulty, Frank Cheeryble without further hesitation pulled at the shorts and worsteds with such heartiness as to bring him floundering into the room with greater precipitation than he had quite calculated upon.

"Oh! yes, yes," said Kate, directly the whole figure of the singular visitor appeared in this abrupt manner. "I know who it is. Pray don't be rough with him. Is he hurt? I hope not—oh, pray see if he is hurt."

"He is not, I assure you," replied Frank, handling the object of his surprise, after this appeal, with sudden tenderness and respect. "He is not hurt in the least."

"Don't let him come any nearer," said Kate, retiring as far as she could.

"No, no, he shall not," rejoined Frank. "You see I have him secure here. But may I ask you what this means, and whether you expected this old gentleman?"

"Oh, no," said Kate, "of course not; but he—mama does not think so, I believe—but he is a mad gentleman who has escaped from the next house, and must have found an opportunity of secreting himself here."

"Kate," interposed Mrs. Nickleby, with severe dignity, "I am surprised at you."

"Dear mama—" Kate gently remonstrated.

"I am surprised at you," repeated Mrs. Nickleby; "upon my word, Kate, I am quite astonished that you should join the persecutors of this unfortunate gentleman, when you know very well that they have the basest designs upon his property, and that that is the whole secret of it. It would be much kinder of you, Kate, to ask Mr. Linkinwater or Mr. Cheeryble to interfere in his behalf, and see him righted. You ought not to allow your feelings to influence you; it's not right—very far from it. What should my feelings be, do you suppose? If anybody ought to be indignant, who is it? I, of course, and very properly so. Still, at the same time, I wouldn't commit such an injustice for the world. No," continued Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up, and looking another way with a kind of bashful state-

liness; "this gentleman will understand me when I tell him that I repeat the answer I gave him the other day,—that I always will repeat it, though I do believe him to be sincere when I find him placing himself in such dreadful situations on my account—and that I request him to have the goodness to go away directly, or it will be impossible to keep his behaviour a secret from my son Nicholas. I am obliged to him, very much obliged to him, but I cannot listen to his addresses for a moment. It's quite impossible."

While this address was in course of delivery, the old gentleman, with his nose and cheeks embellished with large patches of soot, sat upon the ground with his arms folded, eyeing the spectators in profound silence, and with a very majestic demeanour. He did not appear to take the smallest notice of what Mrs. Nickleby said, but when she ceased to speak he honoured her with a long stare, and inquired if she had quite finished.

"I have nothing more to say," replied that lady modestly. "I really cannot say anything more."

"Very good," said the old gentleman, raising his voice, "then bring in the bottled lightning, a clean tumbler, and a corkscrew."

Nobody executing this order, the old gentleman, after a short pause, raised his voice again and demanded a thunder sandwich. This article not being forthcoming either, he requested to be served with a fricassee of boot-tops and goldfish sauce, and then laughing heartily, gratified his hearers with a very long, very loud, and most melodious bellow.

But still Mrs. Nickleby, in reply to the significant looks of all about her, shook her head as though to assure them that she saw nothing whatever in all this, unless, indeed, it were a slight degree of eccentricity. She might have remained impressed with these opinions down to the latest moment of her life, but for a slight train of circumstances, which, trivial as they were, altered the whole complexion of the case.

It happened that Miss La Creevy, finding her patient in no very threatening condition and being strongly impelled by curiosity to see what was going forward, bustled into the room while the old gentleman was in the very act of bellowing. It happened, too, that the instant the old gentleman

saw her, he stopped short, skipped suddenly on his feet, and fell to kissing his hand violently: a change of demeanour which almost terrified the little portrait-painter out of her senses, and caused her to retreat behind Tim Linkinwater with the utmost expedition.

"Aha!" cried the old gentleman, folding his hands, and squeezing them with great force against each other. "I see her now; I see her now. My love, my life, my bride, my peerless beauty. She is come at last—at last—and all is gas and gaiters!"

Mrs. Nickleby looked rather disconcerted for a moment, but immediately recovering, nodded to Miss La Creevy and the other spectators several times, and frowned, and smiled gravely, giving them to understand that she saw where the mistake was, and would set it all to rights in a minute or two.

"She is come!" said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his heart. "Cormoran and Blunderbore! She is come! All the wealth I have is hers if she will take me for her slave. Where are grace beauty and blandishments like those? In the Empress of Madagascar? No. In the Queen of Diamonds? No. In Mrs. Rowland, who every morning bathes in Kalydor for nothing? No. Melt all these down into one, with the three Graces, the nine Muses, and fourteen biscuit-bakers' daughters from Oxford-street, and make a woman half as lovely. Pho! I defy you."

After uttering this rhapsody, the old gentleman snapped his fingers twenty or thirty times, and then subsided into an ecstatic contemplation of Miss La Creevy's charms. This affording Mrs. Nickleby a favourable opportunity of explanation, she went about it straight.

"I am sure," said the worthy lady, with a prefatory cough, "that it's a great relief under such trying circumstances as these, to have anybody else mistaken for me—a very great relief; and it's a circumstance that never occurred before, although I have several times been mistaken for my daughter Kate. I have no doubt the people were very foolish and perhaps ought to have known better, but still they did take me for her, and of course that was no fault of mine and it would be very hard indeed if I was to be made responsible for it. However, in this instance, of course I must feel that I should do exceedingly wrong if I suffered anybody—especially anybody that I am under

great obligations to—to be made uncomfortable on my account, and therefore I think it my duty to tell that gentleman that he is mistaken—that I am the lady who he was told by some impertinent person was niece to the Council of Paving-stones, and that I do beg and entreat of him to go quietly away, if it's only for—" here Mrs. Nickleby simpered and hesitated—"for *my* sake."

It might have been expected that the old gentleman would have been penetrated to the heart by the delicacy and condescension of this appeal, and that he would at least have returned a courteous and suitable reply. What, then, was the shock which Mrs. Nickleby received, when, accosting *her* in the most unmistakeable manner, he replied in a loud and sonorous voice—"Avaunt—Cat!"

"Sir!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, in a faint tone.

"Cat!" repeated the old gentleman. "Puss, Kit, Tit, Grimalkin, Tabby, Brindle—Whoosh!" With which last sound, uttered in a hissing manner between his teeth, the old gentleman swung his arms violently round and round, and at the same time alternately advanced on Mrs. Nickleby, and retreated from her, in that species of savage dance with which boys on market-days may be seen to frighten pigs, sheep, and other animals, when they give out obstinate indications of turning down a wrong street.

Mrs. Nickleby wasted no words, but uttered an exclamation of horror and surprise, and immediately fainted away.

"I'll attend to mama," said Kate, hastily; "I am not at all frightened. But pray take him away; pray take him away."

Frank was not at all confident of his power of complying with this request, until he bethought himself of the stratagem of sending Miss La Creevy on a few paces in advance, and urging the old gentleman to follow her. It succeeded to a miracle; and he went away in a rapture of admiration, strongly guarded by Tim Linkinwater on one side, and Frank himself on the other.

"Kate," murmured Mrs. Nickleby, reviving when the coast was clear, "is he gone?"

She was assured that he was.

"I shall never forgive myself, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby; "Never! That gentleman has lost his senses, and *I* am the unhappy cause."

"*You* the cause!" said Kate, greatly astonished.

"I, my love," replied Mrs. Nickleby, with a desperate calmness. "You saw what he was the other day; you see what he is now. I told your brother, weeks and weeks ago, Kate, that I hoped a disappointment might not be too much for him. You see what a wreck he is. Making allowance for his being a little flighty, you know how rationally, and sensibly, and honourably he talked, when we saw him in the garden. You have heard the dreadful nonsense he has been guilty of this night, and the manner in which he has gone on with that poor unfortunate little old maid. Can anybody doubt how all this has been brought about!"

"I should scarcely think they could," said Kate mildly.

"*I* should scarcely think so, either," rejoined her mother. "Well! if I am the unfortunate cause of this, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am not to blame. I told Nicholas—I said to him, 'Nicholas, my dear, we should be very careful how we proceed.' He would scarcely hear me. If the matter had only been properly taken up at first, as I wished it to be—— But you are both of you so like your poor papa. However, I have *my* consolation, and that should be enough for me!"

Washing her hands, thus, of all responsibility under this head, past, present, or to come, Mrs. Nickleby kindly added that she hoped her children might never have greater cause to reproach themselves than she had, and prepared herself to receive the escort, who soon returned with the intelligence that the old gentleman was safely housed, and that they found his custodians, who had been making merry with some friends, wholly ignorant of his absence.

Quiet being again restored, a delicious half hour—so Frank called it in the course of subsequent conversation with Tim Linkinwater as they were walking home—a delicious half hour was spent in conversation, and Tim's watch at length apprising him that it was high time to depart, the ladies were left alone, though not without many offers on the part of Frank to remain until Nicholas arrived, no matter what hour of the night it might be, if, after the late neighbourly irruption, they entertained the least fear of being left to themselves. As their freedom from all further apprehension, however, left no pretext for his insisting on mounting guard, he was obliged to abandon the citadel, and to retire with the trusty Tim.

Nearly three hours of silence passed away, and Kate

blushed to find, when Nicholas returned, how long she had been sitting alone occupied with her own thoughts.

"I really thought it had not been half an hour," she said.

"They must have been pleasant thoughts, Kate," rejoined Nicholas gaily, "to make time pass away like that. What were they now?"

Kate was confused; she toyed with some trifle on the table—looked up and smiled—looked down and dropped a tear.

"Why, Kate," said Nicholas, drawing his sister towards him and kissing her, "let me see your face. No? Ah! that was but a glimpse; that's scarcely fair. A longer look than that, Kate. Come—and I'll read your thoughts for you."

There was something in this proposition, albeit it was said without the slightest consciousness or application, which so alarmed his sister, that Nicholas laughingly changed the subject to domestic matters, and thus gathered by degrees as they left the room and went up-stairs together, how lonely Smike had been all night—and by very slow degrees, too, for on this subject also Kate seemed to speak with some reluctance.

"Poor fellow," said Nicholas, tapping gently at his door, "what can be the cause of all this!"

Kate was hanging on her brother's arm, and the door being quickly opened, had not time to disengage herself, before Smike, very pale and haggard, and completely dressed, confronted them.

"And have you not been to bed?" said Nicholas.

"N—n—no," was the reply.

Nicholas gently detained his sister, who made an effort to retire; and asked, "Why not?"

"I could not sleep," said Smike, grasping the hand which his friend extended to him.

"You are not well?" rejoined Nicholas.

"I am better, indeed—a great deal better," said Smike quickly.

"Then why do you give way to these fits of melancholy?" inquired Nicholas, in his kindest manner; "or why not tell us the cause? You grow a different creature, Smike."

"I do; I know I do," he replied. "I will tell you the

reason one day, but not now. I hate myself for this; you are all so good and kind. But I cannot help it. My heart is very full;—you do not know how full it is."

He wrung Nicholas's hand before he released it; and glancing for a moment at the brother and sister as they stood together, as if there were something in their strong affection which touched him very deeply, withdrew into his chamber, and was soon the only watcher under that quiet roof.

CHAPTER L.

INVOLVES A SERIOUS CATASTROPHE.

The little race-course at Hampton was in the full tide and height of its gaiety, the day as dazzling as day could be, the sun high in the cloudless sky and shining in its fullest splendour. Every gaudy colour that fluttered in the air from carriage seat and garish tent top, shone out in its gaudiest hues. Old dingy flags grew new again, faded gilding was re-burnished, stained rotten canvas looked a snowy white; the very beggars' rags were freshened up, and sentiment quite forgot its charity in its fervent admiration of poverty so picturesque.

It was one of those scenes of life and animation, caught in its very brightest and freshest moments, which can scarcely fail to please; for if the eye be tired of show and glare, or the ear be weary with a ceaseless round of noise, the one may repose, turn almost where it will, on eager, happy, and expectant faces, and the other deaden all consciousness of more annoying sounds in those of mirth and exhilaration. Even the sunburnt faces of gipsy children, half naked though they be, suggest a drop of comfort. It is a pleasant thing to see that the sun has been there; to know that the air and light are on them every day; to feel that they *are* children and lead children's lives; that if their pillows be damp, it is with the dews of Heaven, and not with tears; that the limbs of their girls are free, and that they are not crippled by distortions, imposing an unnatural and horrible penance upon their sex; that their lives are spent from day to day at least among the waving

trees, and not in the midst of dreadful engines which make young children old before they know what childhood is, and give them the exhaustion and infirmity of age, without, like age, the privilege to die. God send that old nursery tales were true, and that gipsies stole such children by the score!

The great race of the day had just been run; and the close lines of people on either side of the course suddenly breaking up and pouring into it, imparted a new liveliness to the scene, which was again all busy movement. Some hurried eagerly to catch a glimpse of the winning horse; others darted to and fro searching no less eagerly for the carriages they had left in quest of better stations. Here a little knot gathered round a pea and thimble table to watch the plucking of some unhappy greenhorn; and there another proprietor with his confederates in various disguises —one man in spectacles, another with an eye-glass and a stylish hat, a third dressed as a farmer well to do in the world, with his top-coat over his arm and his flash notes in a large leathern pocket-book, and all with heavy-handled whips to represent most innocent country fellows who had trotted there on horseback—sought, by loud and noisy talk and pretended play, to entrap some unwary customer, while the gentlemen confederates (of more villanous aspect still, in clean linen and good clothes) betrayed their close interest in the concern by the anxious furtive glance they cast on all new comers. These would be hanging on the outskirts of a wide circle of people assembled round some itinerant juggler, opposed in his turn by a noisy band of music, or the classic game of "Ring the Bull," while ventriloquists holding dialogues with wooden dolls, and fortune-telling women smothering the cries of real babies, divided with them, and many more, the general attention of the company. Drinking-tents were full, glasses began to clink in carriages, hampers to be unpacked, tempting provisions to be set forth, knives and forks to rattle, champagne corks to fly, eyes to brighten that were not dull before, and pickpockets to count their gains during the last heat. The attention so recently strained on one object of interest, was now divided among a hundred; and look where you would, was a motley assemblage of feasting, laughing, talking, begging, gambling, and mummery.

Of the gambling-booths there was a plentiful show, flourishing in all the splendour of carpeted ground, striped

hangings, crimson cloth, pinnacled roofs, geranium pots, and livery servants. There were the Stranger's club-house, the Athenæum club-house, the Hampton club-house, the Saint James's club-house, and half-a-mile of club-houses to play *in;* and there was *rouge-et-noir*, French hazard, and *la merveille*, to play *at*. It is into one of these booths that our story takes its way.

Fitted up with three tables for the purposes of play, and crowded with players and lookers on, it was—although the largest place of the kind upon the course—intensely hot, notwithstanding that a portion of the canvas roof was rolled back to admit more air, and there were two doors for a free passage in and out. Excepting one or two men who—each with a long roll of half-crowns, chequered with a few stray sovereigns, in his left hand—staked their money at every roll of the ball with a business-like sedateness which showed that they were used to it, and had been playing all day and most probably all the day before, there was no very distinctive character about the players, who were chiefly young men apparently attracted by curiosity, or staking small sums as part of the amusement of the day, with no very great interest in winning or losing. There were two persons present, however, who, as peculiarly good specimens of a class, deserve a passing notice.

Of these, one was a man of six or eight and fifty, who sat on a chair near one of the entrances of the booth, with his hands folded on the top of his stick and his chin appearing above them. He was a tall, fat, long-bodied man, buttoned up to the throat in a light green coat, which made his body look still longer than it was, and wore besides drab breeches and gaiters, a white neckerchief, and a broad-brimmed white hat. Amid all the buzzing noise of the games and the perpetual passing in and out of people, he seemed perfectly calm and abstracted, without the smallest particle of excitement in his composition. He exhibited no indication of weariness, nor, to a casual observer, of interest either. There he sat, quite still and collected. Sometimes, but very rarely, he nodded to some passing face, or beckoned to a waiter to obey a call from one of the tables. The next instant he subsided into his old state. He might have been some profoundly deaf old gentleman, who had come in to take a rest, or he might have been patiently waiting for a friend without the least consciousness

of anybody's presence, or fixed in a trance, or under the influence of opium. People turned round and looked at him; he made no gesture, caught nobody's eye, let them pass away, and others come on and be succeeded by others, and took no notice. When he did move, it seemed wonderful how he could have seen anything to occasion it. And so, in truth, it was. But there was not a face that passed in or out this man failed to see, not a gesture at any one of the three tables that was lost upon him, not a word spoken by the bankers but reached his ear, not a winner or loser he could not have marked; and he was the proprietor of the place.

The other presided over the *rouge-et-noir* table. He was probably some ten years younger, and was a plump, paunchy, sturdy-looking fellow, with his under-lip a little pursed from a habit of counting money inwardly as he paid it, but with no decidedly bad expression in his face, which was rather an honest and jolly one than otherwise. He wore no coat, the weather being hot, and stood behind the table with a huge mound of crowns and half-crowns before him, and a cash-box for notes. This game was constantly playing. Perhaps twenty people would be staking at the same time. This man had to roll the ball, to watch the stakes as they were laid down, to gather them off the colour which lost, to pay those who won, to do it all with the utmost despatch, to roll the ball again, and to keep this game perpetually alive. He did it all with a rapidity absolutely marvellous; never hesitating, never making a mistake, never stopping, and never ceasing to repeat such unconnected phrases as the following, which, partly from habit, and partly to have something appropriate and business-like to say, he constantly poured out with the same monotonous emphasis, and in nearly the same order, all day long:—

"Rooge-a-nore from Paris! Gentlemen, make your game and back your own opinions—any time while the ball rolls—rooge-a-nore from Paris, gentlemen, it's a French game, gentlemen, I brought it over myself, I did indeed!—Rooge-a-nore from Paris—black wins—black—stop a minute, Sir, and I'll pay you directly—two there, half a pound there, three there—and one there—gentlemen, the ball's a rolling—any time, Sir, while the ball rolls—The beauty of this game is, that you can double your stakes or put down your

money, gentlemen, any time while the ball rolls—black again—black wins—I never saw such a thing—I never did in all my life, upon my word I never did; if any gentleman had been backing the black in the last five minutes he must have won five and forty pound in four rolls of the ball, he must indeed.—Gentlemen, we've port, sherry, cigars, and most excellent champagne. Here, wai-ter, bring a bottle of champagne, and let's have a dozen or fifteen cigars here—and let's be comfortable, gentlemen—and bring some clean glasses—any time while the ball rolls—I lost one hundred and thirty-seven pound yesterday, gentlemen, at one roll of the ball, I did indeed!—how do you do, Sir," (recognising some knowing gentleman without any halt or change of voice, and giving a wink so slight that it seems an accident) "will you take a glass of sherry, Sir—here, wai-ter, bring a clean glass, and hand the sherry to this gentleman—and hand it round, will you, waiter—this is the rooge-a-nore from Paris, gentlemen—any time while the ball rolls—gentlemen, make your game, and back your own opinions—it's the rooge-a-nore from Paris, quite a new game, I brought it over myself, I did indeed—gentlemen, the ball's a rolling!"

This officer was busily plying his vocation when half-a-dozen persons sauntered through the booth, to whom—but without stopping either in his speech or work—he bowed respectfully, at the same time directing by a look the attention of a man beside him to the tallest figure in the group, in recognition of whom the proprietor pulled off his hat. This was Sir Mulberry Hawk, with whom were his friend and pupil, and a small train of gentlemanly-dressed men, of characters more doubtful than obscure.

The proprietor, in a low voice, bade Sir Mulberry good day. Sir Mulberry, in the same tone, bade the proprietor go to the devil, and turned to speak with his friends.

There was evidently an irritable consciousness about him that he was an object of curiosity on this first occasion of showing himself in public after the accident that had befallen him; and it was easy to perceive that he appeared on the race-course, that day, more in the hope of meeting with a great many people who knew him, and so getting over as much as possible of the annoyance at once, than with any purpose of enjoying the sport. There yet remained a slight scar upon his face, and whenever he was

recognised, as he was almost every minute by people sauntering in and out, he made a restless effort to conceal it with his glove, showing how keenly he felt the disgrace he had undergone.

"Ah! Hawk," said one very sprucely-dressed personage in a Newmarket coat, a choice neckerchief, and all other accessories of the most unexceptionable kind. "How d'ye do, old fellow?"

This was a rival trainer of young noblemen and gentlemen, and the person of all others whom Sir Mulberry most hated and dreaded to meet. They shook hands with excessive cordiality.

"And how are you now, old fellow, hey?"

"Quite well, quite well," said Sir Mulberry.

"That's right," said the other. "How d'ye do, Verisopht? He's a little pulled down, our friend here—rather out of condition still, hey?"

It should be observed that the gentleman had very white teeth, and that when there was no excuse for laughing, he generally finished with the same monosyllable, which he uttered so as to display them.

"He's in very good condition, there's nothing the matter with him," said the young man carelessly.

"Upon my soul I'm glad to hear it," rejoined the other. "Have you just returned from Brussels?"

"We only reached town late last night," said Lord Frederick. Sir Mulberry turned away to speak to one of his own party, and feigned not to hear.

"Now, upon my life," said the friend, affecting to speak in a whisper, "it's an uncommonly bold and game thing in Hawk to show himself so soon. I say it advisedly; there's a vast deal of courage in it. You see he has just rusticated long enough to excite curiosity, and not long enough for men to have forgotten that deuced unpleasant—by the bye—you know the rights of the affair, of course. Why did you never give those confounded papers the lie? I seldom read the papers, but I looked in the papers for that, and may I be——"

"Look in the papers," interrupted Sir Mulberry, turning suddenly round, "to-morrow—no, next day, will you?"

"Upon my life, my dear fellow, I seldom or never read the papers," said the other, shrugging his shoulders, "but I will at your recommendation. What shall I look for, hey?"

"Good day," said Sir Mulberry, turning abruptly on his heel, and drawing his pupil with him. Falling again into the loitering careless pace at which they had entered, they lounged out arm in arm.

"I won't give him a case of murder to read," muttered Sir Mulberry with an oath; "but it shall be something very near it, if whip-cord cuts and bludgeons bruise."

His companion said nothing, but there was that in his manner which galled Sir Mulberry to add, with nearly as much ferocity as if his friend had been Nicholas himself:

"I sent Jenkins to Nickleby before eight o'clock this morning. He's a staunch one; he was back with me before the messenger. I had it all from him in the first five minutes. I know where this hound is to be met with—time and place both. But there's no need to talk; to-morrow will soon be here."

"And wha-at's to be done to-morrow?" inquired Lord Frederick.

Sir Mulberry Hawk honoured him with an angry glance, but condescended to return no verbal answer to this inquiry, and both walked sullenly on as though their thoughts were busily occupied, until they were quite clear of the crowd, and almost alone, when Sir Mulberry wheeled round to return.

"Stop," said his companion, "I want to speak to you—in earnest. Don't turn back. Let us walk here a few minutes."

"What have you to say to me, that you could not say yonder as well as here?" returned his Mentor, disengaging his arm.

"Hawk," rejoined the other, "tell me; I must know—"

"*Must* know," interrupted the other disdainfully. "Whew! Go on If you must know, of course there's no escape for me. Must know!"

"Must ask then," returned Lord Frederick, "and must press you for a plain and straightforward answer—is what you have just said only a mere whim of the moment, occasioned by your being out of humour and irritated, or is it your serious intention, and one that you have actually contemplated?"

"Why, don't you remember what passed on the subject one night, when I was laid up with a broken limb?" said Sir Mulberry, with a sneer.

"Perfectly well."

"Then take that for an answer, in the devil's name," replied Sir Mulberry, "and ask me for no other."

Such was the ascendancy he had acquired over his dupe, and such the latter's general habit of submission, that, for the moment, the young man seemed half-afraid to pursue the subject. He soon overcame this feeling, however, if it had restrained him at all, and retorted angrily:

"If I remember what passed at the time you speak of, I expressed a strong opinion on this subject, and said that with my knowledge or consent, you never should do what you threaten now."

"Will you prevent me?" asked Sir Mulberry, with a laugh.

"Ye-es, if I can;" returned the other, promptly.

"A very proper saving clause, that last," said Sir Mulberry; "and one you stand in need of. Oh! look to your own business, and leave me to look to mine."

"This *is* mine," retorted Lord Frederick. "I make it mine; I will make it mine. It's mine already. I am more compromised than I should be, as it is."

"Do as you please, and what you please, for yourself," said Sir Mulberry, affecting an easy good humour. "Surely that must content you! Do nothing for me; that's all. I advise no man to interfere in proceedings that I choose to take, and I am sure you know me better than to do so. The fact is, I see, you mean to offer me advice. It is well meant, I have no doubt, but I reject it. Now, if you please, we will return to the carriage. I find no entertainment here, but quite the reverse, and if we prolonged this conversation we might quarrel, which would be no proof of wisdom in either you or me."

With this rejoinder, and waiting for no further discussion, Sir Mulberry Hawk yawned, and very leisurely turned back.

There was not a little tact and knowledge of the young lord's disposition in this mode of treating him. Sir Mulberry clearly saw that if his dominion were to last, it must be established now. He knew that the moment he became violent, the young man would become violent too. He had many times been enabled to strengthen his influence when any circumstance had occurred to weaken it, by adopting this cool and laconic style, and he trusted to it now, with very little doubt of its entire success.

But while he did this, and wore the most careless and indifferent deportment that his practised arts enabled him to assume, he inwardly resolved not only to visit all the mortification of being compelled to suppress his feelings, with additional severity upon Nicholas, but also to make the young lord pay dearly for it one day in some shape or other. So long as he had been a passive instrument in his hands, Sir Mulberry had regarded him with no other feeling than contempt; but now that he presumed to avow opinions in opposition to his, and even to turn upon him with a lofty tone and an air of superiority, he began to hate him. Conscious that in the vilest and most worthless sense of the term, he was dependent upon the weak young lord, Sir Mulberry could the less brook humiliation at his hands, and when he began to dislike him he measured his dislike —as men often do—by the extent of the injuries he had inflicted upon its object. When it is remembered that Sir Mulberry Hawk had plundered, duped, deceived, and fooled his pupil in every possible way, it will not be wondered at that beginning to hate him, he began to hate him cordially.

On the other hand, the young lord having thought—which he very seldom did about anything—having thought, and seriously too, upon the affair with Nicholas, and the circumstances which led to it, had arrived at a manly and honest conclusion. Sir Mulberry's coarse and insulting behaviour on the occasion in question had produced a deep impression on his mind; a strong suspicion of his having led him on to pursue Miss Nickleby for purposes of his own, had been lurking there for some time; he was really ashamed of his share in the transaction, and deeply mortified by the misgiving that he had been gulled. He had had sufficient leisure to reflect upon these things during their late retirement, and at times when his careless and indolent nature would permit, had availed himself of the opportunity. Slight circumstances too had occurred to increase his suspicion. It wanted but a very slight circumstance to kindle his wrath against Sir Mulberry, and this his disdainful and insolent tone in their recent conversation (the only one they had held upon the subject since the period to which Sir Mulberry referred) effected.

Thus they rejoined their friends, each with causes of dislike against the other rankling in his breast, and the young

man haunted besides with thoughts of the vindictive retaliation which was threatened against Nicholas, and the determination to prevent it by some strong step, if possible. But this was not all. Sir Mulberry, conceiving that he had silenced him effectually, could not suppress his triumph, or forbear from following up what he conceived to be his advantage. Mr. Pyke was there, and Mr. Pluck was there, and Colonel Chouser, and other gentlemen of the same caste, and it was a great point for Sir Mulberry to show them that he had not lost his influence. At first the young lord contented himself with a silent determination to take measures for withdrawing himself from the connexion immediately. By degrees he grew more angry, and was exasperated by jests and familiarities which a few hours before would have been a source of amusement to him. This did not serve him, for at such bantering or retort as suited the company, he was no match for Sir Mulberry. Still no violent rupture took place, and they returned to town, Messrs. Pyke and Pluck and other gentlemen frequently protesting on the way thither, that Sir Mulberry had never been in such tiptop spirits in all his life.

They dined together sumptuously. The wine flowed freely, as indeed it had done all day. Sir Mulberry drank to recompense himself for his recent abstinence, the young lord to drown his indignation, and the remainder of the party, because the wine was of the best and they had nothing to pay. It was nearly midnight when they rushed out, wild, burning with wine, their blood boiling, and their brains on fire, to the gaming-table.

Here they encountered another party, mad like themselves. The excitement of play, hot rooms, and glaring lights, was not calculated to allay the fever of the time. In that giddy whirl of noise and confusion the men were delirious. Who thought of money, ruin, or the morrow, in the savage intoxication of the moment? More wine was called for, glass after glass was drained, their parched and scalding mouths were cracked with thirst. Down poured the wine like oil on blazing fire. And still the riot went on—the debauchery gained its height; glasses were dashed upon the floor by hands that could not carry them to lips; oaths were shouted out by lips which could scarcely form the words to vent them in; drunken losers cursed and roared; some mounted on the tables, waving bottles above their heads

and bidding defiance to the rest; some danced, some sang, some tore the cards and raved. Tumult and frenzy reigned supreme; when a noise arose that drowned all others, and two men, seizing each other by the throat, struggled into the middle of the room.

A dozen voices, until now unheard, called aloud to part them. Those who had kept themselves cool to win, and who earned their living in such scenes, threw themselves upon the combatants, and forcing them asunder, dragged them some space apart.

"Let me go!" cried Sir Mulberry, in a thick hoarse voice; "he struck me! Do you hear? I say, he struck me. Have I a friend here? Who is this? Westwood. Do you hear me say he struck me!"

"I hear, I hear," replied one of those who held him. "Come away, for to-night!"

"I will not, by G—," he replied, fiercely. "A dozen men about us saw the blow."

"To-morrow will be ample time," said the friend.

"It will not be ample time!" cried Sir Mulberry, gnashing his teeth. "To-night—at once—here!" His passion was so great that he could not articulate, but stood clenching his fist, tearing his hair, and stamping upon the ground.

"What is this, my lord?" said one of those who surrounded him. "Have blows passed?"

"*One* blow has," was the panting reply. "I struck him —I proclaim it to all here. I struck him, and he well knows why. I say with him, let this quarrel be adjusted now. Captain Adams," said the young lord, looking hurriedly about him, and addressing one of those who had interposed, "Let me speak with you, I beg."

The person addressed stepped forward, and, taking the young man's arm, they retired together, followed shortly afterwards by Sir Mulberry and his friend.

It was a profligate haunt of the worst repute, and not a place in which such an affair was likely to awaken any sympathy for either party, or to call forth any further remonstrance or interposition. Elsewhere its further progress would have been instantly prevented, and time allowed for sober and cool reflection; but not there. Disturbed in their orgies, the party broke up; some reeled away with looks of tipsy gravity; others withdrew, noisily discussing what had just occurred; the gentlemen of honour who lived upon

their winnings remarked to each other as they went out that Hawk was a good shot; and those who had been most noisy fell fast asleep upon the sofas, and thought no more about it.

Meanwhile, the two seconds, as they may be called now, after a long conference, each with his principal, met together in another room. Both utterly heartless, both men upon town, both thoroughly initiated in its worst vices, both deeply in debt, both fallen from some higher estate, both addicted to every depravity for which society can find some genteel name and plead its most depraving conventionalities as an excuse, they were naturally gentlemen of unblemished honour themselves, and of great nicety concerning the honour of other people.

These two gentlemen were unusually cheerful just now; for the affair was pretty certain to make some noise, and could scarcely fail to enhance their reputations considerably.

"This is an awkward affair, Adams," said Mr. Westwood, drawing himself up.

"Very," returned the captain; "a blow has been struck, and there is but one course, *of* course."

"No apology, I suppose?" said Mr. Westwood.

"Not a syllable, Sir, from my man, if we talk till doomsday," returned the captain. "The original cause of dispute, I understand, was some girl or other, to whom your principal applied certain terms, which Lord Frederick, defending the girl, repelled. But this led to a long recrimination upon a great many sore subjects, charges, and counter-charges. Sir Mulberry was sarcastic; Lord Frederick was excited, and struck him in the heat of provocation, and under circumstances of great aggravation. That blow, unless there is a full retraction on the part of Sir Mulberry, Lord Frederick is ready to justify."

"There is no more to be said," returned the other, "but to settle the hour and the place of meeting. It's a responsibility; but there is a strong feeling to have it over: do you object to say at sunrise?"

"Sharp work," replied the captain, referring to his watch; "however, as this seems to have been a long time brooding, and negotiation is only a waste of words—no."

"Something may possibly be said out of doors after what passed in the other room, which renders it desirable that we should be off without delay, and quite clear of town,"

said Mr. Westwood. "What do you say to one of the meadows opposite Twickenham, by the river-side?"

The captain saw no objection.

"Shall we join company in the avenue of trees which leads from Petersham to Ham House, and settle the exact spot when we arrive there?" said Mr. Westwood.

To this the captain also assented. After a few other preliminaries, equally brief, and having settled the road each party should take to avoid suspicion, they separated.

"We shall just have comfortable time, my lord," said the captain, when he had communicated the arrangements, "to call at my rooms for a case of pistols, and then jog coolly down. If you will allow me to dismiss your servant, we'll take my cab, for yours, perhaps, might be recognised."

What a contrast, when they reached the street, to the scene they had just left! It was already daybreak. For the flaring yellow light within, was substituted the clear, bright, glorious morning; for a hot, close atmosphere, tainted with the smell of expiring lamps, and reeking with the steams of riot and dissipation, the free, fresh, wholesome air. But to the fevered head on which that cool air blew, it seemed to come laden with remorse for time misspent and countless opportunities neglected. With throbbing veins and burning skin, eyes wild and heavy, thoughts hurried and disordered, he felt as though the light were a reproach, and shrank involuntarily from the day as if he were some foul and hideous thing.

"Shivering?" said the captain. "You are cold."

"Rather."

"It does strike cool, coming out of those hot rooms. Wrap that cloak about you. So, so; now we're off."

They rattled through the quiet streets, made their call at the captain's lodgings, cleared the town, and emerged upon the open road, without hindrance or molestation.

Fields, trees, gardens, hedges, everything looked very beautiful; the young man scarcely seemed to have noticed them before, though he had passed the same objects a thousand times. There was a peace and serenity upon them all, strangely at variance with the bewilderment and confusion of his own half-sobered thoughts, and yet impressive and welcome. He had no fear upon his mind; but as he looked about him he had less anger; and though all old delusions, relative to his worthless late companion, were now

cleared away, he rather wished he had never known him than thought of its having come to this.

The past night, the day before, and many other days and nights beside, all mingled themselves up in one unintelligible and senseless whirl; he could not separate the transactions of one time from those of another. Last night seemed a week ago, and months ago were as last night. Now the noise of the wheels resolved itself into some wild tune in which he could recognise scraps of airs he knew; and now there was nothing in his ears but a stunning and bewildering sound like rushing water. But his companion rallied him on being so silent, and they talked and laughed boisterously. When they stopped, he was a little surprised to find himself in the act of smoking; but on reflection he remembered when and where he had taken the cigar.

They stopped at the avenue gate and alighted, leaving the carriage to the care of the servant, who was a smart fellow, and nearly as well accustomed to such proceedings as his master. Sir Mulberry and his friend were already there, and all four walked in profound silence up the aisle of stately elm trees, which, meeting far above their heads, formed a long green perspective of gothic arches, terminating like some old ruin in the open sky.

After a pause, and a brief conference between the seconds, they at length turned to the right, and taking a track across a little meadow, passed Ham House and came into some fields beyond. In one of these they stopped. The ground was measured, some usual forms gone through, the two principals were placed front to front at the distance agreed upon, and Sir Mulberry turned his face towards his young adversary for the first time. He was very pale—his eyes were bloodshot, his dress disordered, and his hair dishevelled,—all most probably the consequences of the previous day and night. For the face, it expressed nothing but violent and evil passions. He shaded his eyes with his hand, gazed at his opponent steadfastly for a few moments, and then taking the weapon which was tendered to him, bent his eyes upon that, and looked up no more until the word was given, when he instantly fired.

The two shots were fired as nearly as possible at the same instant. In that instant the young lord turned his head sharply round, fixed upon his adversary a ghastly stare, and, without a groan or stagger, fell down dead.

"He's gone," cried Westwood, who, with the other second, had run up to the body, and fallen on one knee beside it.

"His blood on his own head," said Sir Mulberry. "He brought this upon himself, and forced it upon me."

"Captain Adams," cried Westwood, hastily, "I call you to witness that this was fairly done. Hawk, we have not a moment to lose. We must leave this place immediately, push for Brighton, and cross to France with all speed. This has been a bad business, and may be worse if we delay a moment. Adams, consult your own safety, and don't remain here; the living before the dead—good bye."

With these words, he seized Sir Mulberry by the arm, and hurried him away. Captain Adams—only pausing to convince himself, beyond all question, of the fatal result—sped off in the same direction, to concert measures with his servant for removing the body, and securing his own safety likewise.

So died Lord Frederick Verisopht, by the hand which he had loaded with gifts and clasped a thousand times; by the act of him, but for whom and others like him he might have lived a happy man, and died with children's faces round his bed.

The sun came proudly up in all his majesty, the noble river ran its winding course, the leaves quivered and rustled in the air, the birds poured their cheerful songs from every tree, the short-lived butterfly fluttered its little wings; all the light and life of day came on; and, amidst it all, and pressing down the grass whose every blade bore twenty tiny lives, lay the dead man, with his stark and rigid face turned upwards to the sky.

CHAPTER LI.

THE PROJECT OF MR. RALPH NICKLEBY AND HIS FRIEND, APPROACHING A SUCCESSFUL ISSUE, BECOMES UNEXPECTEDLY KNOWN TO ANOTHER PARTY NOT ADMITTED INTO THEIR CONFIDENCE.

In an old house, dismal dark and dusty, which seemed to have withered, like himself, and to have grown yellow and shrivelled in hoarding him from the light of day, as he had in hoarding his money, lived Arthur Gride. Meagre old chairs and tables of spare and bony make, and hard and cold as misers' hearts, were ranged in grim array against the gloomy walls; attenuated presses, grown lank and lantern-jawed in guarding the treasures they inclosed, and tottering, as though from constant fear and dread of thieves, shrunk up in dark corners, whence they cast no shadows on the ground, and seemed to hide and cower from observation. A tall grim clock upon the stairs, with long lean hands and famished face, ticked in cautious whispers, and when it struck the time in thin and piping sounds, like an old man's voice, rattled as if 'twere pinched with hunger.

No fireside couch was there, to invite repose and comfort. Elbow-chairs there were, but they looked uneasy in their minds, cocked their arms suspiciously and timidly, and kept upon their guard. Others were fantastically grim and gaunt, as having drawn themselves up to their utmost height, and put on their fiercest looks to stare all comers out of countenance. Others again knocked up against their neighbours, or leant for support against the wall, somewhat ostentatiously, as if to call all men to witness that they were not worth the taking The dark square lumbering bedsteads seemed built for restless dreams; the musty hangings to creep in scanty folds together, whispering among themselves, when rustled by the wind, their trembling knowledge of the tempting wares that lurked within the dark and tight-locked closets.

From out the most spare and hungry room in all this spare and hungry house, there came one morning the trem-

ulous tones of old Gride's voice, as it feebly chirruped forth the fag end of some forgotten song, of which the burden ran:

Ta—ran—tan—too,
Throw the old shoe,
And may the wedding be lucky!

which he repeated in the same shrill quavering notes again and again, until a violent fit of coughing obliged him to desist, and to pursue in silence the occupation upon which he was engaged.

This occupation was to take down from the shelves of a worm-eaten wardrobe, a quantity of frowsy garments, one by one; to subject each to a careful and minute inspection by holding it up against the light, and after folding it with great exactness, to lay it on one or other of two little heaps beside him. He never took two articles of clothing out together, but always brought them forth singly, and never failed to shut the wardrobe door and turn the key, between each visit to its shelves.

"The snuff-coloured suit," said Arthur Gride, surveying a threadbare coat, "Did I look well in snuff-colour? Let me think."

The result of his cogitations appeared to be unfavourable, for he folded the garment once more, laid it aside, and mounted on a chair to get down another, chirping while he did so:

Young, loving, and fair,
Oh what happiness there!
The wedding is sure to be lucky!

"They always put in 'young,'" said old Arthur, "but songs are only written for the sake of rhyme, and this is a silly one that the poor country people sang when I was a little boy. Though stop—young is quite right too—it means the bride—yes. He, he, he! It means the bride. Oh dear, that's good. That's very good. And true besides—quite true!"

In the satisfaction of this discovery he went over the verse again with increased expression and a shake or two here and there, and then resumed his employment.

"The bottle-green," said old Arthur; "the bottle-green was a famous suit to wear, and I bought it very cheap at a pawnbroker's, and there was—he, he, he!—a tarnished

shilling in the waistcoat pocket. To think that the pawnbroker shouldn't have known there was a shilling in it! I knew it; I felt it when I was examining the quality. Oh, what a dull dog! It was a lucky suit too, this bottle-green. The very day I put it on first, old Lord Mallowford was burn't to death in his bed, and all the post-obits fell in. I'll be married in the bottle-green. Peg—Peg Sliderskew—I'll wear the bottle-green."

This call, loudly repeated twice or thrice at the room door, brought into the apartment a short, thin, weasen, blear-eyed old woman, palsy-stricken and hideously ugly, who, wiping her shrivelled face upon her dirty apron, inquired, in that subdued tone in which deaf people commonly speak:—

"Was that you a calling, or only the clock a striking? My hearing gets so bad, I never know which is which; but when I hear a noise I know it must be one of you, because nothing else ever stirs in the house."

"Me, Peg—me," said Arthur Gride, tapping himself on the breast to render the reply more intelligible.

"You, eh?" returned Peg. "And what do *you* want?"

"I'll be married in the bottle-green," cried Arthur Gride.

"It's a deal too good to be married in, master," rejoined Peg, after a short inspection of the suit. "Haven't you got anything worse than this?"

"Nothing that'll do," replied old Arthur.

"Why not do?" retorted Peg. "Why don't you wear your every-day clothes like a man—eh?"

"They an't becoming enough, Peg," returned her master.

"Not what enough?" said Peg.

"Becoming."

"Becoming what?" said Peg, sharply. "Not becoming too old to wear?"

Arthur Gride muttered an imprecation upon his housekeeper's deafness, as he roared in her ear:—

"Not smart enough: I want to look as well as I can."

"Look?" cried Peg. "If she's as handsome as you say she is, she won't look much at you, master, take your oath of that; and as to how you look yourself—pepper-and-salt, bottle-green, sky-blue, or tartan-plaid will make no difference in you."

With which consolatory assurance, Peg Sliderskew gathered up the chosen suit, and folding her skinny arms upon

the bundle, stood mouthing, and grinning, and blinking her watery eyes like an uncouth figure in some monstrous piece of carving.

"You're in a funny humour, an't you, Peg?" said Arthur, with not the best possible grace.

"Why, isn't it enough to make me?" rejoined the old woman. "I shall soon enough be put out, though, if anybody tries to domineer it over me: and so I give you notice, master. Nobody shall be put over Peg Sliderskew's head after so many years; you know that, and so I needn't tell you. That won't do for me—no, no, nor for you. Try that once and come to ruin—ruin—ruin!"

"Oh dear, dear, I shall never try it," said Arthur Gride, appalled by the mention of the word, "not for the world. It would be very easy to ruin me; we must be very careful; more saving than ever with another mouth to feed. Only we—we mustn't let her lose her good looks, Peg, because I like to see 'em."

"Take care you don't find good looks come expensive," returned Peg, shaking her fore-finger.

"But she can earn money herself, Peg," said Arthur Gride, eagerly watching what effect his communication produced upon the old woman's countenance: "she can draw, paint, work all manner of pretty things for ornamenting stools and chairs: slippers, Peg, watch-guards, hair-chains, and a thousand little dainty trifles that I couldn't give you half the names of. Then she can play the piano (and, what's more, she's got one) and sing like a little bird. She'll be very cheap to dress and keep, Peg; don't you think she will?"

"If you don't let her make a fool of you, she may," returned Peg.

"A fool of me!" exclaimed Arthur. "Trust your old master not to be fooled by pretty faces, Peg; no, no, no—nor by ugly ones neither, Mrs. Sliderskew," he softly added by way of soliloquy.

"You're a saying something you don't want me to hear," said Peg; "I know you are."

"Oh dear! the devil's in this woman," muttered Arthur, adding with an ugly leer, "I said I trusted everything to you, Peg, that was all."

"You do that, master, and all your cares are over," said Peg approvingly.

"*When* I do that, Peg Sliderskew," thought Arthur Gride, "they will be."

Although he thought this very distinctly, he durst not move his lips lest the old woman should detect him. He even seemed half afraid that she might have read his thoughts, for he leered coaxingly upon her as he said aloud:—

"Take up all loose stitches in the bottle-green with the best black silk. Have a skein of the best, and some new buttons for the coat, and—this is a good idea, Peg, and one you'll like, I know—as I have never given her anything yet, and girls like such attentions, you shall polish up a sparkling necklace that I have got up stairs, and I'll give it her upon the wedding morning—clasp it round her charming little neck myself—and take it away again next day. He, he, he!—lock it up for her, Peg, and lose it. Who'll be made the fool of there, I wonder, to begin with—eh, Peg?"

Mrs. Sliderskew appeared to approve highly of this ingenious scheme, and expressed her satisfaction by various rackings and twitchings of her head and body, which by no means enhanced her charms. These she prolonged until she had hobbled to the door, when she exchanged them for a sour malignant look, and twisting her under-jaw from side to side, muttered hearty curses upon the future Mrs. Gride, as she crept slowly down the stairs, and paused for breath at nearly every one.

"She's half a witch, I think," said Arthur Gride, when he found himself again alone. "But she's very frugal, and she's very deaf; her living costs me next to nothing, and it's no use her listening at keyholes for she can't hear. She's a charming woman—for the purpose; a most discreet old housekeeper, and worth her weight in—copper."

Having extolled the merits of his domestic in these high terms, old Arthur went back to the burden of his song, and the suit destined to grace his approaching nuptials being now selected, replaced the others with no less care than he had displayed in drawing them from the musty nooks where they had silently reposed for many years.

Startled by a ring at the door he hastily concluded this operation, and locked the press; but there was no need for any particular hurry as the discreet Peg seldom knew the bell was rung unless she happened to cast her dim eyes upwards and to see it shaking against the kitchen ceiling.

After a short delay, however, Peg tottered in, followed by Newman Noggs.

"Ah! Mr. Noggs!" cried Arthur Gride, rubbing his hands. "My good friend, Mr. Noggs, what news do you bring for me?"

Newman, with a steadfast and immovable aspect, and his fixed eye very fixed indeed, replied, suiting the action to the word, "A letter. From Mr. Nickleby. The bearer waits."

"Won't you take a—a—"

Newman looked up, and smacked his lips.

"A chair?" said Arthur Gride.

"No," replied Newman. "Thank'ee."

Arthur opened the letter with trembling hands, and devoured its contents with the utmost greediness, chuckling rapturously over it and reading it several times before he could take it from before his eyes. So many times did he peruse and re-peruse it, that Newman considered it expedient to remind him of his presence.

"Answer," said Newman. "Bearer waits."

"True," replied old Arthur. "Yes—yes; I almost forgot, I do declare."

"I thought you were forgetting," said Newman.

"Quite right to remind me, Mr. Noggs. Oh, very right indeed," said Arthur. "Yes. I'll write a line. I'm—I'm—rather flurried, Mr. Noggs. The news is—"

"Bad?" interrupted Newman.

"No, Mr. Noggs, thank you; good, good. The very best of news. Sit down, I'll get the pen and ink, and write a line in answer. I'll not detain you long, I know you're a treasure to your master, Mr. Noggs. He speaks of you in such terms sometimes, that, oh dear! you'd be astonished. I may say that I do too, and always did. I always say the same of you."

"That's 'Curse Mr. Noggs with all my heart!' then, if you do," thought Newman, as Gride hurried out.

The letter had fallen on the ground. Looking carefully about him for an instant, Newman, impelled by curiosity to know the result of the design he had overheard from his office closet, caught it up and rapidly read as follows:

"Gride,

"I saw Bray again this morning, and proposed the day after to-morrow (as you suggested) for the marriage. There

is no objection on his part, and all days are alike to his daughter. We will go together, and you must be with me by seven in the morning. I need not tell you to be punctual.

"Make no further visits to the girl in the meantime. You have been there of late much oftener than you should. She does not languish for you, and it might have been dangerous. Restrain your youthful ardour for eight-and-forty hours, and leave her to the father. You only undo what he does, and does well.

"Yours,

"Ralph Nickleby."

A footstep was heard without. Newman dropped the letter on the same spot again, pressed it with his foot to prevent its fluttering away, regained his seat in a single stride, and looked as vacant and unconscious as ever mortal looked. Arthur Gride, after peering nervously about him, spied it on the ground, picked it up, and sitting down to write, glanced at Newman Noggs, who was staring at the wall with an intensity so remarkable, that Arthur was quite alarmed.

"Do you see anything particular, Mr. Noggs?" said Arthur, trying to follow the direction of Newman's eyes—which was an impossibility, and a thing no man had ever done.

"Only a cobweb," replied Newman.

"Oh, is that all?"

"No," said Newman. "There's a fly in it."

"There are a good many cobwebs here," observed Arthur Gride.

"So there are in our place," returned Newman; "and flies too."

Newman appeared to derive great entertainment from this repartee, and to the great discomposure of Arthur Gride's nerves produced a series of sharp cracks from his finger-joints, resembling the noise of a distant discharge of small artillery. Arthur succeeded in finishing his reply to Ralph's note, nevertheless, and at length handed it over to the eccentric messenger for delivery.

"That's it, Mr. Noggs," said Gride.

Newman gave a nod, put it in his hat, and was shuffling away, when Gride, whose doting delight knew no bounds,

beckoned him back again, and said in a shrill whisper, and with a grin which puckered up his whole face, and almost obscured his eyes:

"Will you—will you take a little drop of something—just a taste?"

In good fellowship (if Arthur Gride had been capable of it) Newman would not have drunk with him one bubble of the richest wine that was ever made; but to see what he would be at, and to punish him as much as he could, he accepted the offer immediately.

Arthur Gride, therefore, again applied himself to the press, and from a shelf laden with tall Flemish drinking-glasses and quaint bottles, some with necks like so many storks, and others with square Dutch-built bodies and short fat apoplectic throats, took down one dusty bottle of promising appearance and two glasses of curiously small size.

"You never tasted this," said Arthur. "It's *eau-d'or*—golden water. I like it on account of its name. It's a delicious name. Water of gold, golden water! O dear me, it seems quite a sin to drink it!"

As his courage appeared to be fast failing him, and he trifled with the stopper in a manner which threatened the dismissal of the bottle to its old place, Newman took up one of the little glasses and chinked it twice or thrice against the bottle, as a gentle reminder that he had not been helped yet. With a deep sigh Arthur Gride slowly filled it—though not to the brim—and then filled his own.

"Stop, stop; don't drink it yet," he said, laying his hand on Newman's; "it was given to me twenty years ago, and when I take a little taste, which is ve—ry seldom, I like to think of it beforehand and teaze myself. We'll drink a toast. Shall we have a toast, Mr. Noggs?"

"Ah!" said Newman, eyeing his little glass impatiently. "Look sharp. Bearer waits."

"Why, then, I'll tell you what," tittered Arthur, "we'll drink—he, he, he!—we'll drink a lady."

"*The* ladies?" said Newman.

"No, no, Mr. Noggs," replied Gride, arresting his hand, "*a* lady. You wonder to hear me say *a* lady—I know you do, I know you do. Here's little Madeline—that's the toast, Mr. Noggs—little Madeline!"

"Madeline!" said Newman; inwardly adding, "and God help her!"

The rapidity and unconcern with which Newman dismissed his portion of the golden water had a great effect upon the old man, who sat upright in his chair and gazed at him open-mouthed, as if the sight had taken away his breath. Quite unmoved, however, Newman left him to sip his own at leisure, or to pour it back again into the bottle if he chose, and departed; after greatly outraging the dignity of Peg Sliderskew by brushing past her in the passage without a word of apology or recognition.

Mr. Gride and his housekeeper, immediately on being left alone, resolved themselves into a committee of ways and means, and discussed the arrangements which should be made for the reception of the young bride. As they were, like some other committees, extremely dull and prolix in debate, this history may pursue the footsteps of Newman Noggs, thereby combining advantage with necessity; for it would have been necessary to do so under any circumstances, and necessity has no law as all the world know.

"You've been a long time," said Ralph, when Newman returned.

"He was a long time," replied Newman.

"Bah!" cried Ralph, impatiently. "Give me his note, if he gave you one; his message, if he didn't. And don't go away; I want a word with you, Sir."

Newman handed in the note, and looked very virtuous and innocent while his employer broke the seal, and glanced his eye over it.

"He'll be sure to come!" muttered Ralph, as he tore it to pieces; "why of course, I know he'll be sure to come. What need to say that? Noggs! Pray Sir, what man was that with whom I saw you in the street last night?"

"I don't know," replied Newman.

"You had better refresh your memory, Sir," said Ralph, with a threatening look.

"I tell you," returned Newman boldly, "that I don't know him at all. He came here, twice and asked for you. You were out. He came again. You packed him off yourself. He gave the name of Brooker."

"I know he did," said Ralph; "what then?"

"What then? Why, then he lurked about and dogged me in the street. He follows me night after night, and urges me to bring him face to face with you, as he says he

has been once, and not long ago either. He wants to see you face to face, he says, and you'll soon hear him out, he warrants."

"And what say you to that?" inquired Ralph, looking keenly at his drudge.

"That it's no business of mine, and I won't. I told him he might catch you in the street, if that was all he wanted, but no! that wouldn't do. You wouldn't hear a word there, he said. He must have you alone in a room with the door locked, where he could speak without fear, and you'd soon change your tone, and hear him patiently."

"An audacious dog!" Ralph muttered.

"That's all I know," said Newman. "I say again, I don't know what man he is. I don't believe he knows himself. You have seen him; perhaps *you* do."

"I think I do," replied Ralph.

"Well," retorted Newman, sulkily, "then don't expect me to know him too, that's all. You'll ask me next why I never told you this before. What would you say, if I was to tell you all that people say of you? What do you call me when I sometimes do? 'Brute, ass!' and snap at me like a dragon."

This was true enough, though the question which Newman anticipated was, in fact, upon Ralph's lips at the moment.

"He is an idle ruffian," said Ralph; "a vagabond from beyond the sea where he travelled for his crimes; a felon let loose to run his neck into the halter; a swindler, who has the audacity to try his schemes on me who know him well. The next time he tampers with you, hand him over to the police, for attempting to extort money by lies and threats,—dy'e hear?—and leave the rest to me. He shall cool his heels in jail a little time, and I'll be bound he looks for other folks to fleece when he comes out. You mind what I say, do you?"

"I hear," said Newman.

"Do it then," returned Ralph, "and I'll reward you. Now, you may go."

Newman readily availed himself of the permission, and shutting himself up in his little office, remained there in very serious cogitation all day. When he was released at night, he proceeded with all the expedition he could use to the City, and took up his old position behind the pump, to

watch for Nicholas—for Newman Noggs was proud in his way, and could not bear to appear as his friend before the Brothers Cheeryble, in the shabby and degraded state to which he was reduced.

He had not occupied this position many minutes when he was rejoiced to see Nicholas approaching, and darted out from his ambuscade to meet him. Nicholas, on his part, was no less pleased to encounter his friend, whom he had not seen for some time, so their greeting was a warm one.

"I was thinking of you at that moment," said Nicholas.

"That's right," rejoined Newman, "and I of you. I couldn't help coming up to-night. I say, I think I'm going to find out something."

"And what may that be?" returned Nicholas, smiling at this odd communication.

"I don't know what it may be, I don't know what it may not be," said Newman; "it's some secret in which your uncle is concerned, but what, I've not yet been able to discover, although I have my strong suspicions. I'll not hint 'em now, in case you should be disappointed."

"*I* disappointed!" cried Nicholas; "am I interested?"

"I think you are," replied Newman. "I have a crotchet in my head that it must be so. I have found out a man, who plainly knows more than he cares to tell at once. And he has already dropped such hints to me as puzzle me—I say, as puzzle me," said Newman, scratching his red nose into a state of violent inflammation, and staring at Nicholas with all his might and main meanwhile.

Admiring what could have wound his friend up to such a pitch of mystery, Nicholas endeavoured, by a series of questions, to elucidate the cause; but in vain. Newman could not be drawn into any more explicit statement, than a repetition of the perplexities he had already thrown out, and a confused oration, showing, How it was necessary to use the utmost caution; how the lynx-eyed Ralph had already seen him in company with his unknown correspondent; and how he had baffled the said Ralph by extreme guardedness of manner and ingenuity of speech, having prepared himself for such a contingency from the first.

Remembering his companion's propensity,—of which his nose, indeed, perpetually warned all beholders like a beacon,—Nicholas had drawn him into a sequestered tavern, and here they fell to reviewing the origin and progress of

their acquaintance, as men sometimes do, and tracing out the little events by which it was most strongly marked, came at last to Miss Cecilia Bobster.

"And that reminds me," said Newman, "that you never told me the young lady's real name."

"Madeline," said Nicholas.

"Madeline!" cried Newman. "What Madeline? Her other name—say her other name."

"Bray," said Nicholas, in great astonishment.

"It's the same!" shrieked Newman. "Sad story! Can you stand idly by, and let that unnatural marriage take place without one attempt to save her?"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicholas, starting up; "marriage! Are you mad?"

"Are you? Is she? Are you blind, deaf, senseless, dead?" said Newman. "Do you know that within one day, by means of your uncle Ralph, she will be married to a man as bad as he, and worse, if worse there is? Do you know that within one day she will be sacrificed, as sure as you stand there alive, to a hoary wretch—a devil born and bred, and grey in devils' ways?"

"Be careful what you say," replied Nicholas, "for Heaven's sake be careful. I am left here alone, and those who could stretch out a hand to rescue her are far away. What is it that you mean?"

"I never heard her name," said Newman, choking with his energy. "Why didn't you tell me? How was I to know? We might at least have had some time to think!"

"What is it that you mean?" cried Nicholas.

It was not an easy task to arrive at this information; but after a great quantity of extraordinary pantomime which in no way assisted it, Nicholas, who was almost as wild as Newman Noggs himself, forced him down upon his seat and held him down until he began his tale.

Rage, astonishment, indignation, and a storm of passions rushed through the listener's heart as the plot was laid bare. He no sooner understood it all, than with a face of ashy paleness, and trembling in every limb, he darted from the house.

"Stop him!" cried Newman, bolting out in pursuit. "He'll be doing something desperate—he'll murder somebody. Hallo! there, stop him. Stop thief! stop thief!"

CHAPTER LII.

NICHOLAS DESPAIRS OF RESCUING MADELINE BRAY, BUT PLUCKS UP HIS SPIRITS AGAIN, AND DETERMINES TO ATTEMPT IT. DOMESTIC INTELLIGENCE OF THE KENWIGSES AND LILLYVICKS.

FINDING that Newman was determined to arrest his progress at any hazard, and apprehensive that some well-intentioned passenger attracted by the cry of "stop thief," might really lay violent hands upon his person, and place him in a disagreeable predicament from which he might have some difficulty in extricating himself, Nicholas soon slackened his pace, and suffered Newman Noggs to come up with him, which he did in so breathless a condition that it seemed impossible he could have held out for a minute longer.

"I will go straight to Bray's," said Nicholas. "I will see this man; and if there is one feeling of humanity lingering in his breast, one spark of consideration for his own child, motherless and friendless as she is, I will awaken it."

"You will not," replied Newman. "You will not, indeed."

"Then," said Nicholas, pressing onward, "I will act upon my first impulse, and go straight to Ralph Nickleby."

"By the time you reach his house he will be in bed," said Newman.

"I'll drag him from it," cried Nicholas, fiercely.

"Tut, tut," said Noggs. "Be yourself."

"You are the best of friends to me, Newman," rejoined Nicholas after a pause, and taking his hand as he spoke. "I have made head against many trials, but the misery of another, and such misery, is involved in this one, that I declare to you I am rendered desperate, and know not how to act."

In truth, it did seem a hopeless case. It was impossible to make any use of such intelligence as Newman Noggs had gleaned when he lay concealed in the closet. The mere circumstance of the compact between Ralph Nickleby and Gride would not invalidate the marriage, or render Bray averse to it, who, if he did not actually know of the exist-

ence of some such understanding, doubtless suspected it. What had been hinted with reference to some fraud on Madeline, had been put with sufficient obscurity by Arthur Gride, but coming from Newman Noggs, and obscured still further by the smoke of his pocket pistol, it became wholly unintelligible and involved in utter darkness.

"There seems no ray of hope," said Nicholas.

"The greater necessity for coolness, for reason, for consideration, for thought," said Newman, pausing at every alternate word, to look anxiously in his friend's face. "Where are the brothers?"

"Both absent on urgent business, as they will be for a week to come."

"Is there no way of communicating with them? No way of getting one of them here by to-morrow night?"

"Impossible!" said Nicholas, "the sea is between us and them. With the fairest winds that ever blew, to go and return would take three days and nights."

"Their nephew—" said Newman, "their old clerk."

"What could either do that I cannot?" rejoined Nicholas. "With reference to them especially, I am enjoined to the strictest silence on this subject. What right have I to betray the confidence reposed in me, when nothing but a miracle can prevent this monstrous sacrifice?"

"Think," urged Newman. "Is there no way?"

"There is none," said Nicholas, in utter dejection. "Not one. The father urges—the daughter consents. These demons have her in their toils; legal right, might, power, money, and every influence are on their side. How can I hope to save her?"

"Hope to the last," said Newman, clapping him on the back. "Always hope, that's a dear boy. Never leave off hoping, it don't answer. Do you mind me, Nick? It don't answer. Don't leave a stone unturned. It's always something to know you've done the most you could. But don't leave off hoping, or it's of no use doing anything. Hope, hope, to the last!"

Nicholas needed encouragement, for the suddenness with which intelligence of the two usurers' plans had come upon him, the little time which remained for exertion, the probability, almost amounting to certainty itself, that a few hours would place Madeline Bray for ever beyond his reach, consign her to unspeakable misery, and perhaps to an un-

timely death: all this quite stunned and overwhelmed him. Every hope connected with her that he had suffered himself to form, or had entertained unconsciously, seemed to fall at his feet withered and dead. Every charm with which his memory or imagination had surrounded her, presented itself before him only to heighten his anguish and add new bitterness to his despair. Every feeling of sympathy for her forlorn condition, and of admiration for her heroism and fortitude, aggravated the indignation which shook him in every limb, and swelled his heart almost to bursting.

But if Nicholas's own heart embarrassed him, Newman's came to his relief. There was so much earnestness in his remonstrance, and such sincerity and fervour in his manner, odd and ludicrous as it always was, that it imparted to Nicholas new firmness, and enabled him to say, after he had walked on for some little way in silence:—

"You read me a good lesson, Newman, and I will profit by it. One step at least I may take—am bound to take indeed—and to that I will apply myself to-morrow."

"What is that?" asked Noggs, wistfully. "Not to threaten Ralph? Not to see the father?"

"To see the daughter, Newman," replied Nicholas. "To do what after all is the utmost that the brothers could do if they were here, as Heaven send they were! To reason with her upon this hideous union, to point out to her all the horrors to which she is hastening; rashly, it may be, and without due reflection. To entreat her at least to pause. She can have had no counsellor for her good; and perhaps even I may move her so far yet, though it is the eleventh hour, and she upon the very brink of ruin."

"Bravely spoken!" said Newman. "Well done, well done! Yes. Very good."

"And I do declare," cried Nicholas, with honest enthusiasm, "that in this effort I am influenced by no selfish or personal considerations, but by pity for her and detestation and abhorrence of this heartless scheme; and that I would do the same, were there twenty rivals in the field, and I the last and least favoured of them all."

"You would, I believe," said Newman. "But where are you hurrying now?"

"Homewards," answered Nicholas. "Do you come with me, or shall I say good-night?"

"I'll come a little way if you will but walk, not run," said Noggs.

"I cannot walk to-night, Newman," returned Nicholas, hurriedly. "I must move rapidly, or I could not draw my breath. I'll tell you what I've said and done to-morrow!"

Without waiting for a reply, he darted off at a rapid pace, and, plunging into the crowds which thronged the street, was quickly lost to view.

"He's a violent youth at times," said Newman, looking after him; "and yet I like him for it. There's cause enough now, or the deuce is in it. Hope! I *said* hope, I think! Ralph Nickleby and Gride with their heads together—and hope for the opposite party! Ho! ho!"

It was with a very melancholy laugh that Newman Noggs concluded this soliloquy, and it was with a very melancholy shake of the head and a very rueful countenance, that he turned about, and went plodding on his way.

This, under ordinary circumstances, would have been to some small tavern or dram-shop, that being his way in more senses than one; but Newman was too much interested and too anxious to betake himself even to this resource, and so, with many desponding and dismal reflections, went straight home.

It had come to pass that afternoon, that Miss Morleena Kenwigs had received an invitation to repair next day per steamer from Westminster Bridge unto the Eel-pie Island at Twickenham, there to make merry upon a cold collation, bottled-beer, shrub, and shrimps, and to dance in the open air to the music of a locomotive band, conveyed thither for the purpose: the steamer being specially engaged by a dancing-master of extensive connexion for the accommodation of his numerous pupils, and the pupils displaying their appreciation of the dancing-master's services by purchasing themselves, and inducing their friends to do the like, divers light-blue tickets entitling them to join the expedition. Of these light-blue tickets, one had been presented by an ambitious neighbour to Miss Morleena Kenwigs, with an invitation to join her daughters; and Mrs. Kenwigs, rightly deeming that the honour of the family was involved in Miss Morleena's making the most splendid appearance possible on so short a notice, and testifying to the dancing-master that there were other dancing-masters

besides him, and to all fathers and mothers present that other people's children could learn to be genteel besides theirs, had fainted away twice under the magnitude of her preparations, but, upheld by a determination to sustain the family name or perish in the attempt, was still hard at work when Newman Noggs came home.

Now, between the italian-ironing of frills, the flouncing of trousers, the trimming of frocks, the faintings and the comings-to again, incidental to the occasion, Mrs. Kenwigs had been so entirely occupied that she had not observed, until within half an hour before, that the flaxen tails of Miss Morleena's hair were in a manner run to seed; and that, unless she were put under the hands of a skilful hair-dresser, she never could achieve that signal triumph over the daughters of all other people, anything less than which would be tantamount to defeat. This discovery drove Mrs. Kenwigs to despair, for the hair-dresser lived three streets and eight dangerous crossings off. Morleena could not be trusted to go there alone, even if such a proceeding were strictly proper, of which Mrs. Kenwigs had her doubts; Mr. Kenwigs had not returned from business; and there was nobody to take her. So Mrs. Kenwigs first slapped Miss Kenwigs for being the cause of her vexation, and then shed tears.

"You ungrateful child!" said Mrs. Kenwigs, "after I have gone through what I have this night for your good."

"I can't help it, ma," replied Morleena, also in tears; "my hair *will* grow."

"Don't talk to me, you naughty thing!" said Mrs. Kenwigs, "don't. Even if I was to trust you by yourself and you were to escape being run over, I know you'd run in to Laura Chopkins," who was the daughter of the ambitious neighbour, "and tell her what you're going to wear to-morrow, I know you would. You've no proper pride in yourself, and are not to be trusted out of sight for an instant."

Deploring the evil-mindedness of her eldest daughter in these terms, Mrs. Kenwigs distilled fresh drops of vexation from her eyes, and declared that she did believe there never was anybody so tried as she was. Thereupon Morleena Kenwigs wept afresh, and they bemoaned themselves together.

Matters were at this point as Newman Noggs was heard to limp past the door on his way up-stairs, when Mrs. Ken-

wigs, gaining new hope from the sound of his footsteps, hastily removed from her countenance as many traces of her late emotion as were effaceable on so short a notice; and presenting herself before him, and representing their dilemma, entreated that he would escort Morleena to the hair-dresser's shop.

"I wouldn't ask you, Mr. Noggs," said Mrs. Kenwigs, "if I didn't know what a good, kind-hearted creature you are—no, not for worlds. I am a weak constitution, Mr. Noggs, but my spirit would no more let me ask a favour where I thought there was a chance of its being refused, than it would let me submit to see my children trampled down and trod upon by envy and lowness!"

Newman was too good-natured not to have consented, even without this avowal of confidence on the part of Mrs. Kenwigs. Accordingly, a very few minutes had elapsed when he and Miss Morleena were on their way to the hair-dresser's.

It was not exactly a hair-dresser's; that is to say, people of a coarse and vulgar turn of mind might have called it a barber's, for they not only cut and curled ladies elegantly and children carefully, but shaved gentlemen easily. Still it was a highly genteel establishment—quite first-rate in fact—and there were displayed in the window, besides other elegancies, waxen busts of a light lady and a dark gentleman which were the admiration of the whole neighbourhood. Indeed, some ladies had gone so far as to assert, that the dark gentleman was actually a portrait of the spirited young proprietor, and the great similarity between their head-dresses—both wore very glossy hair, with a narrow walk straight down the middle, and a profusion of flat circular curls on both sides—encouraged the idea. The better informed among the sex, however, made light of this assertion, for however willing they were (and they were very willing) to do full justice to the handsome face and figure of the proprietor, they held the countenance of the dark gentleman in the window to be an exquisite and abstract idea of masculine beauty, realised sometimes perhaps among angels and military men, but very rarely embodied to gladden the eyes of mortals.

It was to this establishment that Newman Noggs led Miss Kenwigs in safety, and the proprietor, knowing that Miss Kenwigs had three sisters, each with two flaxen tails,

and all good for sixpence a-piece once a month at least, promptly deserted an old gentleman whom he had just lathered for shaving, and handing him over to the journeyman (who was not very popular among the ladies, by reason of his obesity and middle age) waited on the young lady himself.

Just as this change had been effected, there presented himself for shaving, a big, burly, good-humoured coal-heaver with a pipe in his mouth, who, drawing his hand across his chin, requested to know when a shaver would be disengaged.

The journeyman to whom this question was put looked doubtfully at the young proprietor, and the young proprietor looked scornfully at the coal-heaver, observing, at the same time:—

"You won't get shaved here, my man."

"Why not?" said the coal-heaver.

"We don't shave gentlemen in your line," remarked the young proprietor.

"Why, I see you a shaving of a baker, when I was a-looking through the winder, last week," said the coal-heaver.

"It's necessary to draw the line somewheres, my fine feller," replied the principal. "We draw the line there. We can't go beyond bakers. If we was to get any lower than bakers, our customers would desert us, and we might shut up shop. You must try some other establishment, Sir. We couldn't do it here."

The applicant stared, grinned at Newman Noggs, who appeared highly entertained, looked slightly round the shop as if in depreciation of the pomatum pots and other articles of stock, took his pipe out of his mouth and gave a very loud whistle, and then put it in again, and walked out.

The old gentleman who had just been lathered, and who was sitting in a melancholy manner with his face turned towards the wall, appeared quite unconscious of this incident, and to be insensible to everything around him in the depth of a reverie—a very mournful one, to judge from the sighs he occasionally vented—in which he was absorbed. Affected by this example, the proprietor began to clip Miss Kenwigs, the journeyman to scrape the old gentleman, and Newman Noggs to read last Sunday's paper, all three in silence; when Miss Kenwigs uttered a shrill little

scream, and Newman, raising his eyes, saw that it had been elicited by the circumstance of the old gentleman turning his head, and disclosing the features of Mr. Lillyvick the collector.

The features of Mr. Lillyvick they were, but strangely altered. If ever an old gentleman had made a point of appearing in public, shaved close and clean, that old gentleman was Mr. Lillyvick. If ever a collector had borne himself like a collector, and assumed before all men a solemn and portentous dignity as if he had the world on his books and it was all two quarters in arrear, that collector was Mr. Lillyvick. And now, there he sat with the remains of a beard at least a week old encumbering his chin, a soiled and crumpled shirt-frill crouching as it were upon his breast instead of standing boldly out; a demeanour so abashed and drooping, so despondent, expressive of humiliation, grief, and shame, that if the souls of forty unsubstantial housekeepers, all of whom had had their water cut off for non-payment of the rate, could have been concentrated in one body, that one body could hardly have expressed such mortification and defeat as were now expressed in the person of Mr. Lillyvick the collector.

Newman Noggs uttered his name, and Mr. Lillyvick groaned, then coughed to hide it. But the groan was a full-sized groan, and the cough was but a wheeze.

"Is anything the matter?" said Newman Noggs.

"Matter, Sir!" cried Mr. Lillyvick. "The plug of life is dry, Sir, and but the mud is left."

This speech—the style of which Newman attributed to Mr. Lillyvick's recent association with theatrical characters—not being quite explanatory, Newman looked as if he were about to ask another question, when Mr. Lillyvick prevented him by shaking his hand mournfully, and then waving his own.

"Let me be shaved," said Mr. Lillyvick. "I shall be done before Morleena; it *is* Morleena, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Newman.

"Kenwigses have got a boy, haven't they?" inquired the collector.

Again Newman said "Yes."

"Is it a nice boy?" demanded the collector.

"It ain't a very nasty one," returned Newman, rather embarrassed by the question.

"Susan Kenwigs used to say," observed the collector, "that if ever she had another boy, she hoped it might be like me. Is this one like me, Mr. Noggs?"

This was a puzzling inquiry, but Newman evaded it by replying to Mr. Lillyvick, that he thought the baby might possibly come like him in time.

"I should be glad to have somebody like me, somehow," said Mr. Lillyvick, "before I die."

"You don't mean to do that yet awhile?" said Newman.

Unto which Mr. Lillyvick replied in a solemn voice, "Let me be shaved;" and again consigning himself to the hands of the journeyman, said no more.

This was remarkable behaviour, and so remarkable did it seem to Miss Morleena, that that young lady, at the imminent hazard of having her ear sliced off, had not been able to forbear looking round some score of times during the foregoing colloquy. Of her, however, Mr. Lillyvick took no notice, rather striving (so, at least, it seemed to Newman Noggs) to evade her observation, and to shrink into himself whenever he attracted her regards. Newman wondered very much what could have occasioned this altered behaviour on the part of the collector; but, philosophically reflecting that he would most likely know sooner or later, and that he could perfectly afford to wait, he was very little disturbed by the singularity of the old gentleman's deportment.

The cutting and curling being at last concluded, the old gentleman, who had been some time waiting, rose to go, and, walking out with Newman and his charge, took Newman's arm, and proceeded with them for some time without making any observation. Newman, who in power of taciturnity was excelled by few people, made no attempt to break silence, and so they went on, until they had very nearly reached Miss Morleena's home, when Mr. Lillyvick said:—

"Were the Kenwigses very much overpowered, Mr. Noggs, by that news?"

"What news?" returned Newman.

"That about—my—being——"

"Married?" suggested Newman.

"Ah!" replied Mr. Lillyvick, with another groan—this time not even disguised by a wheeze.

"It made ma cry when she knew it," interposed Miss

Morleena, "but we kept it from her for a long time; and pa was very low in his spirits, but he is better now; and I was very ill, but I am better too."

"Would you give your great-uncle Lillyvick a kiss if he was to ask you, Morleena?" said the collector, with some hesitation.

"Yes,—uncle Lillyvick, I would," returned Miss Morleena, with the energy of both her parents combined; "but not aunt Lillyvick. She's not an aunt of mine, and I'll never call her one."

Immediately upon the utterance of these words, Mr. Lillyvick caught Miss Morleena up in his arms, and kissed her, and, being by this time at the door of the house where Mr. Kenwigs lodged (which, as has been before mentioned, usually stood wide open), he walked straight up into Mr. Kenwigs's sitting-room, and put Miss Morleena down in the midst. Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs were at supper. At sight of their perjured relative, Mrs. Kenwigs turned faint and pale, and Mr. Kenwigs rose majestically.

"Kenwigs," said the collector, "shake hands."

"Sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, "the time has been when I was proud to shake hands with such a man as that man as now surweys me. The time has been, Sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, "when a wisit from that man has excited in me and my family's boozums sensations both nateral and awakening. But now I look upon that man with emotions totally surpassing everythink, and I ask myself where is his honour, where is his straightfor'ardness, and where is his human natur."

"Susan Kenwigs," said Mr. Lillyvick, turning humbly to his niece, "don't you say anything to me?"

"She is not equal to it, Sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, striking the table emphatically. "What with the nursing of a healthy babby, and the reflections upon your cruel conduct, four pints of malt liquor a day is hardly able to sustain her."

"I am glad," said the poor collector meekly, "that the baby is a healthy one. I am very glad of that."

This was touching the Kenwigses on their tenderest point. Mrs. Kenwigs instantly burst into tears, and Mr. Kenwigs evinced great emotion.

"My pleasantest feeling all the time that child was expected," said Mr. Kenwigs, mournfully, "was a thinking, 'if

it's a boy, as I hope it may be, for I have heard its uncle Lillyvick say again and again he would prefer our having a boy next—if it's a boy, what will his uncle Lillyvick say—what will he like him to be called—will he be Peter, or Alexander, or Pompey, or Diorgeenes, or what will he be?' And now when I look at him—a precious, unconscious, helpless infant, with no use in his little arms but to tear his little cap, and no use in his little legs but to kick his little self—when I see him a-lying on his mother's lap cooing and cooing, and in his innocent state, almost a choking himself with his little fist—when I see him such a infant as he is, and think that that uncle Lillyvick, as was once a-going to be so fond of him has withdrawed himself away, such a feeling of wengeance comes over me as no language can depicter, and I feel as if even that holy babe was a-telling me to hate him."

This affecting picture moved Mrs. Kenwigs deeply. After several imperfect words, which vainly attempted to struggle to the surface, but were drowned and washed away by the strong tide of her tears, she spake.

"Uncle," said Mrs. Kenwigs, "to think that you should have turned your back upon me and my dear children, and upon Kenwigs which is the author of their being—you who was once so kind and affectionate, and who, if anybody had told us such a thing of, we should have withered with scorn like lightning—you that little Lillyvick, our first and earliest boy, was named after at the very altar! Oh gracious!"

"Was it money that we cared for?" said Mr. Kenwigs. "Was it property that we ever thought of?"

"No," cried Mrs. Kenwigs, "I scorn it."

"So do I," said Mr. Kenwigs, "and always did."

"My feelings have been lancerated," said Mrs. Kenwigs; "my heart has been torn asunder with anguish, I have been thrown back in my confinement, my unoffending infant has been rendered uncomfortable and fractious, Morleena has pined herself away to nothing; all this I forget and forgive, and with you, uncle, I never can quarrel. But never ask me to receive *her*—never do it, uncle. For I will not, I will not, I won't, I won't, I won't!"

"Susan, my dear," said Mr. Kenwigs, "consider your child."

"Yes," shrieked Mrs. Kenwigs, "I will consider my child! I will consider my child! My own child, that no

uncles can deprive me of, my own hated, despised, deserted, cut-off little child." And here the emotions of Mrs. Kenwigs became so violent that Mr. Kenwigs was fain to administer hartshorn internally and vinegar externally, and to destroy a staylace, four petticoat-strings, and several small buttons.

Newman had been a silent spectator of this scene; for Mr. Lillyvick had signed to him not to withdraw, and Mr. Kenwigs had further solicited his presence by a nod of invitation. When Mrs. Kenwigs had been in some degree restored, and Newman, as a person possessed of some influence with her, had remonstrated and begged her to compose herself, Mr. Lillyvick said in a faltering voice:

"I never shall ask anybody here to receive my—I needn't mention the word, you know what I mean. Kenwigs and Susan, yesterday was a week she eloped with a half-pay captain!"

Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs started together.

"Eloped with a half-pay captain," repeated Mr. Lillyvick, "Basely and falsely eloped with a half-pay captain—with a bottle-nosed captain that any man might have considered himself safe from. It was in this room," said Mr. Lillyvick, looking sternly round, "that I first see Henrietta Petowker. It is in this room I turn her off for ever."

This declaration completely changed the whole posture of affairs. Mrs. Kenwigs threw herself upon the old gentleman's neck, bitterly reproaching herself for her late harshness, and exclaiming if she had suffered, what must his sufferings have been! Mr. Kenwigs grasped his hand and vowed eternal friendship and remorse. Mrs. Kenwigs was horror-stricken to think that she should ever have nourished in her bosom such a snake, adder, viper, serpent, and base crocodile, as Henrietta Petowker. Mr. Kenwigs argued that she must have been bad indeed not to have improved by so long a contemplation of Mrs. Kenwigs's virtue. Mrs. Kenwigs remembered that Mr. Kenwigs had often said that he was not quite satisfied of the propriety of Miss Petowker's conduct, and wondered how it was that she could have been blinded by such a wretch. Mr. Kenwigs remembered that he had had his suspicions, but did not wonder why Mrs. Kenwigs had not had hers, as she was all chastity, purity, and truth, and Henrietta all baseness,

falsehood, and deceit. And Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs both said, with strong feeling and tears of sympathy, that everything happened for the best, and conjured the good collector not to give way to unavailing grief, but to seek consolation in the society of those affectionate relations whose arms and hearts were ever open to him.

"Out of affection and regard for you, Susan and Kenwigs," said Mr. Lillyvick, "and not out of revenge and spite against her, for she is below it, I shall to-morrow morning settle upon your children, and make payable to the survivors of them when they come of age or marry, that money that I once meant to leave 'em in my will. The deed shall be executed to-morrow, and Mr. Noggs shall be one of the witnesses. He hears me promise this, and he shall see it done."

Overpowered by this noble and generous offer, Mr. Kenwigs, Mrs. Kenwigs, and Miss Morleena Kenwigs, all began to sob together, and the noise of their sobbing communicating itself to the next room where the children lay a-bed, and causing them to cry too, Mr. Kenwigs rushed wildly in and bringing them out in his arms by two and two, tumbled them down in their nightcaps and gowns at the feet of Mr. Lillyvick, and called upon them to thank and bless him.

"And now," said Mr. Lillyvick, when a heart-rending scene had ensued and the children were cleared away again, "Give me some supper. This took place twenty mile from town. I came up this morning, and have been lingering about all day without being able to make up my mind to come and see you. I humoured her in everything, she had her own way, she did just as she pleased, and now she has done this. There was twelve teaspoons and twenty-four pound in sovereigns—I missed them first—it's a trial—I feel I shall never be able to knock a double knock again when I go my rounds—don't say anything more about it, please—the spoons were worth—never mind—never mind!"

With such muttered outpourings as these, the old gentleman shed a few tears, but they got him into the elbow-chair and prevailed upon him, without much pressing, to make a hearty supper, and by the time he had finished his first pipe and disposed of half a dozen glasses out of a crown bowl of punch, ordered by Mr. Kenwigs in celebration of

his return to the bosom of his family, he seemed, though still very humble, quite resigned to his fate, and rather relieved than otherwise by the flight of his wife.

"When I see that man," said Mr. Kenwigs, with one hand round Mrs. Kenwigs's waist, his other hand supporting his pipe (which made him wink and cough very much, for he was no smoker) and his eyes on Morleena, who sat upon her uncle's knee, "when I see that man a-mingling once again in the spear which he adorns, and see his affections deweloping themselves in legitimate sitiwations, I feel that his natur is as elewated and expanded as his standing afore society as a public character is unimpeached, and the woices of my infant children purvided for in life, seem to whisper to me softly, 'This is an ewent at which Evins itself looks down!'"

CHAPTER LIII.

CONTAINING THE FURTHER PROGRESS OF THE PLOT CONTRIVED BY MR. RALPH NICKLEBY AND MR. ARTHUR GRIDE.

With that settled resolution and steadiness of purpose to which extreme circumstances so often give birth, acting upon far less excitable and more sluggish temperaments than that which was the lot of Madeline Bray's admirer, Nicholas started, at dawn of day, from the restless couch which no sleep had visited on the previous night, and prepared to make that last appeal by whose slight and fragile thread her only remaining hope of escape depended.

Although to restless and ardent minds, morning may be the fitting season for exertion and activity, it is not always at that time that hope is strongest or the spirit most sanguine and buoyant. In trying and doubtful positions, use, custom, a steady contemplation of the difficulties which surround us, and a familiarity with them, imperceptibly diminish our apprehensions and beget comparative indifference, if not a vague and reckless confidence in some relief, the means or nature of which we care not to foresee. But

when we come fresh upon such things in the morning, with that dark and silent gap between us and yesterday, with every link in the brittle chain of hope to rivet afresh, our hot enthusiasm subdued, and cool calm reason substituted in its stead, doubt and misgiving revive. As the traveller sees farthest by day, and becomes aware of rugged mountains and trackless plains which the friendly darkness had shrouded from his sight and mind together, so the wayfarer in the toilsome path of human life sees with each returning sun some new obstacle to surmount, some new height to be attained; distances stretch out before him which last night were scarcely taken into account, and the light which gilds all nature with its cheerful beams, seems but to shine upon the weary obstacles which yet lie strewn between him and the grave.

So thought Nicholas, when, with the impatience natural to a situation like his, he softly left the house, and, feeling as though to remain in bed were to lose most precious time, and to be up and stirring were in some way to promote the end he had in view, he wandered into London, although perfectly well knowing that for hours to come he could not obtain speech with Madeline, and could do nothing but wish the intervening time away.

And even now, as he paced the streets and listlessly looked round on the gradually increasing bustle and preparation for the day, everything appeared to yield him some new occasion for despondency. Last night the sacrifice of a young, affectionate, and beautiful creature to such a wretch and in such a cause, had seemed a thing too monstrous to succeed, and the warmer he grew the more confident he felt that some interposition must save her from his clutches. But now, when he thought how regularly things went on from day to day in the same unvarying round—how youth and beauty died, and ugly griping age lived tottering on—how crafty avarice grew rich, and manly honest hearts were poor and sad—how few they were who tenanted the stately houses, and how many those who lay in noisome pens, or rose each day and laid them down at night, and lived and died, father and son, mother and child, race upon race, and generation upon generation, without a home to shelter them or the energies of one single man directed to their aid—how in seeking, not a luxurious and splendid life, but the bare means of a most wretched and inadequate

subsistence, there were women and children in that one town, divided into classes, numbered and estimated as regularly as the noble families and folks of great degree, and reared from infancy to drive most criminal and dreadful trades—how ignorance was punished and never taught—how jail-door gaped and gallows loomed for thousands urged towards them by circumstances darkly curtaining their very cradles' heads, and but for which they might have earned their honest bread and lived in peace—how many died in soul, and had no chance of life—how many who could scarcely go astray, be they vicious as they would, turned haughtily from the crushed and stricken wretch who could scarce do otherwise, and who would have been a greater wonder had he or she done well, than even they, had they done ill—how much injustice, and misery, and wrong, there was, and yet how the world rolled on from year to year, alike careless and indifferent, and no man seeking to remedy or redress it:—when he thought of all this, and selected from the mass the one slight case on which his thoughts were bent, he felt indeed that there was little ground for hope, and little cause or reason why it should not form an atom in the huge aggregate of distress and sorrow, and add one small and unimportant unit to swell the great amount.

But youth is not prone to contemplate the darkest side of a picture it can shift at will. By dint of reflecting on what he had to do and reviving the train of thought which night had interrupted, Nicholas gradually summoned up his utmost energy, and by the time the morning was sufficiently advanced for his purpose, had no thought but that of using it to the best advantage. A hasty breakfast taken, and such affairs of business as required prompt attention disposed of, he directed his steps to the residence of Madeline Bray, whither he lost no time in arriving.

It had occurred to him that very possibly the young lady might be denied, although to him she never had been; and he was still pondering upon the surest method of obtaining access to her in that case, when, coming to the door of the house, he found it had been left ajar—probably by the last person who had gone out. The occasion was not one upon which to observe the nicest ceremony; therefore, availing himself of this advantage, Nicholas walked gently up stairs and knocked at the door of the room into which he had been accustomed to be shown. Receiving permission to

enter from some person on the other side, he opened the door and walked in.

Bray and his daughter were sitting there alone. It was nearly three weeks since he had seen her last, but there was a change in the lovely girl before him which told Nicholas, in startling terms, what mental suffering had been compressed into that short time. There are no words which can express, nothing with which can be compared, the perfect pallor, the clear transparent, cold ghastly whiteness, of the beautiful face which turned towards him when he entered. Her hair was a rich deep brown, but shading that face, and straying upon a neck that rivalled it in whiteness, it seemed by the strong contrast raven black. Something of wildness and restlessness there was in the dark eye, but there was the same patient look, the same expression of gentle mournfulness which he well remembered, and no trace of a single tear. Most beautiful—more beautiful perhaps in appearance than ever—there was something in her face which quite unmanned him, and appeared far more touching than the wildest agony of grief. It was not merely calm and composed, but fixed and rigid, as though the violent effort which had summoned that composure beneath her father's eye, while it mastered all other thoughts, had prevented even the momentary expression they had communicated to the features from subsiding, and had fastened it there as an evidence of its triumph.

The father sat opposite to her—not looking directly in her face, but glancing at her as he talked with a gay air which ill disguised the anxiety of his thoughts. The drawing-materials were not on their accustomed table, nor were any of the other tokens of her usual occupations to be seen. The little vases which he had always seen filled with fresh flowers, were empty or supplied only with a few withered stalks and leaves. The bird was silent. The cloth that covered his cage at night was not removed. His mistress had forgotten him.

There are times when the mind being painfully alive to receive impressions, a great deal may be noted at a glance.

This was one, for Nicholas had but glanced round him when he was recognised by Mr. Bray, who said impatiently:

"Now, Sir, what do you want? Name your errand here quickly if you please, for my daughter and I are busily en-

gaged with other and more important matters than those you come about. Come, Sir, address yourself to your business at once."

Nicholas could very well discern that the irritability and impatience of this speech were assumed, and that Bray in his heart was rejoiced at any interruption which promised to engage the attention of his daughter. He bent his eyes involuntarily upon the father as he spoke, and marked his uneasiness, for he coloured directly and turned his head away.

The device, however, so far as it was a device for causing Madeline to interfere, was successful. She rose, and advancing towards Nicholas paused half way, and stretched out her hand as expecting a letter.

"Madeline," said her father impatiently, "my love, what are you doing?"

"Miss Bray expects an enclosure perhaps," said Nicholas, speaking very distinctly, and with an emphasis she could scarcely misunderstand. "My employer is absent from England, or I should have brought a letter with me. I hope she will give me time—a little time—I ask a very little time."

"If that is all you come about, Sir," said Mr. Bray, "you may make yourself easy on that head. Madeline, my dear, I didn't know this person was in your debt?"

"A—a trifle I believe," returned Madeline, faintly.

"I suppose you think now," said Bray, wheeling his chair round and confronting Nicholas, "that but for such pitiful sums as you bring here because my daughter has chosen to employ her time as she has, we should starve?"

"I have not thought about it," returned Nicholas.

"You have not thought about it!" sneered the invalid. "You know you have thought about it, and have thought that and think so every time you come here. Do you suppose, young man, that I don't know what little purse-proud tradesmen are, when through some fortunate circumstances they get the upper hand for a brief day—or think they get the upper hand—of a gentleman?"

"My business," said Nicholas respectfully, "is with a lady."

"With a gentleman's daughter, Sir," returned the sick man, "and the pettifogging spirit is the same. But perhaps you bring *orders* eh? Have you any fresh *orders* for my daughter, Sir?"

Nicholas understood the tone of triumph and the sneer in which this interrogatory was put, but, remembering the necessity of supporting his assumed character, produced a scrap of paper purporting to contain a list of some subjects for drawings which his employer desired to have executed; and with which he had prepared himself in case of any such contingency

"Oh!" said Mr. Bray. "These are the orders, are they?"

"Since you insist upon the term, Sir—yes," replied Nicholas.

"Then you may tell your master," said Bray, tossing the paper back again with an exulting smile, "that my daughter—Miss Madeline Bray—condescends to employ herself no longer in such labours as these; that she is not at his beck and call, as he supposes her to be; that we don't live upon his money, as he flatters himself we do; that he may give whatever he owes us to the first beggar that passes his shop, or add it to his own profits next time he calculates them; and that he may go to the devil, for me. That's my acknowledgment of his orders, Sir!"

"And this is the independence of a man who sells his daughter as he has sold that weeping girl!" thought Nicholas indignantly.

The father was too much absorbed with his own exultation to mark the look of scorn which for an instant Nicholas would not have suppressed had he been upon the rack. "There," he continued, after a short silence, "you have your message and can retire—unless you have any further —ha!—any further orders."

"I have none," said Nicholas sternly; "neither in consideration of the station you once held, have I used that or any other word which, however harmless in itself, could be supposed to imply authority on my part or dependence on yours. I have no orders, but I have fears—fears that I will express, chafe as you may—fears that you may be consigning that young lady to something worse than supporting you by the labour of her hands, had she worked herself dead. These are my fears, and these fears I found upon your own demeanour. Your conscience will tell you, Sir, whether I construe it well or not."

"For Heaven's sake!" cried Madeline, interposing in alarm between them. "Remember, Sir, he is ill."

"Ill!" cried the invalid, gasping and catching for breath. "Ill! Ill! I am bearded and bullied by a shopboy, and she beseeches him to pity me and remember I am ill!"

He fell into a paroxysm of his disorder, so violent that for a few moments Nicholas was alarmed for his life; but finding that he began to recover, he withdrew after signifying by a gesture to the young lady that he had something important to communicate, and would wait for her outside the room. He could hear that the sick man came gradually but slowly to himself, and that without any reference to what had just occurred, as though he had no distinct recollection of it as yet, he requested to be left alone.

"Oh!" thought Nicholas, "that this slender chance might not be lost, and that I might prevail if it were but for one week's time and re-consideration!"

"You are charged with some commission to me, Sir," said Madeline, presenting herself in great agitation. "Do not press it now, I beg and pray you. The day after to-morrow—come here then."

"It will be too late—too late for what I have to say," rejoined Nicholas, "and you will not be here. Oh, madam, if you have but one thought of him who sent me here, but one last lingering care for your own peace of mind and heart, I do for God's sake urge you to give me a hearing."

She attempted to pass him, but Nicholas gently detained her.

"A hearing," said Nicholas. "I ask you but to hear me—not me alone, but him for whom I speak, who is far away and does not know your danger. In the name of Heaven hear me."

The poor attendant with her eyes swollen and red with weeping stood by, and to her Nicholas appealed in such passionate terms that she opened a side-door, and supporting her mistress into an adjoining room beckoned Nicholas to follow them.

"Leave me, Sir, pray," said the young lady.

"I cannot, will not leave you thus," returned Nicholas. "I have a duty to discharge, and either here or in the room from which we have just now come, at whatever risk or hazard to Mr. Bray, I must beseech you to contemplate again the fearful course to which you have been impelled."

"What course is this you speak of, and impelled by

whom, Sir?" demanded the young lady, with an effort to speak proudly.

"I speak of this marriage," returned Nicholas, "of this marriage, fixed for to-morrow by one who never faltered in a bad purpose, or lent his aid to any good design; of this marriage, the history of which is known to me, better, far better, than it is to you. I know what web is wound about you. I know what men they are from whom these schemes have come. You are betrayed, and sold for money—for gold, whose every coin is rusted with tears, if not red with the blood of ruined men, who have fallen desperately by their own mad hands."

"You say you have a duty to discharge," said Madeline, firmly, "and so have I. And with the help of Heaven I will perform it."

"Say rather with the help of devils," replied Nicholas, "with the help of men, one of them your destined husband, who are——"

"I must not hear this," cried the young lady, striving to repress a shudder, occasioned, as it seemed, even by this slight allusion to Arthur Gride. "This evil, if evil it is, has been of my own seeking. I am impelled to this course by no one, but follow it of my own free will. You see I am not constrained or forced by menace and intimidation. Report this," said Madeline, "to my dear friend and benefactor, and, taking with you my prayers and thanks for him and for yourself, leave me for ever."

"Not until I have besought you, with all the earnestness and fervour by which I am animated," cried Nicholas, "to postpone this marriage for one short week. Not until I have besought you to think more deeply than you can have done, influenced as you are, upon the step you are about to take. Although you cannot be fully conscious of the villany of this man to whom you are about to give your hand, some of his deeds you know. You have heard him speak, and looked upon his face—reflect, reflect before it is too late, on the mockery of plighting to him at the altar, faith in which your heart can have no share—of uttering solemn words, against which nature and reason must rebel—of the degradation of yourself in your own esteem, which must ensue, and must be aggravated every day as his detested character opens upon you more and more. Shrink from the loathsome companionship of this foul wretch as you would

from corruption and disease. Suffer toil and labour if you will, but shun him, shun him, and be happy. For, believe me, that I speak the truth, the most abject poverty, the most wretched condition of human life, with a pure and upright mind, would be happiness to that which you must undergo as the wife of such a man as this!"

Long before Nicholas ceased to speak, the young lady buried her face in her hands, and gave her tears free way. In a voice at first inarticulate with emotion, but gradually recovering strength as she proceeded, she answered him:

"I will not disguise from you, Sir—though perhaps I ought—that I have undergone great pain of mind, and have been nearly broken-hearted since I saw you last. I do *not* love this gentleman: the difference between our ages, tastes, and habits, forbids it. This he knows, and knowing, still offers me his hand. By accepting it, and by that step alone, I can release my father who is dying in this place, prolong his life, perhaps, for many years, restore him to comfort—I may almost call it affluence—and relieve a generous man from the burden of assisting one by whom, I grieve to say, his noble heart is little understood. Do not think so poorly of me as to believe that I feign a love I do not feel. Do not report so ill of me, for *that* I could not bear. If I cannot in reason or in nature love the man who pays this price for my poor hand, I can discharge the duties of a wife: I can be all he seeks in me, and will. He is content to take me as I am. I have passed my word, and should rejoice, not weep, that it is so—I do. The interest you take in one so friendless and forlorn as I, the delicacy with which you have discharged your trust, the faith you have kept with me, have my warmest thanks, and, while I make this last feeble acknowledgment, move me to tears, as you see. But I do not repent, nor am I unhappy. I am happy in the prospect of all I can achieve so easily, and shall be more so when I look back upon it, and all is done, I know."

"Your tears fall faster as you talk of happiness," said Nicholas, "and you shun the contemplation of that dark future which must come laden with so much misery to you. Defer this marriage for a week—for but one week."

"He was talking, when you came upon us just now, with such smiles as I remember to have seen of old, and have not seen for many and many a day, of the freedom that was

to come to-morrow," said Madeline, with momentary firmness, "of the welcome change, the fresh air, all the new scenes and objects that would bring fresh life to his exhausted frame. His eye grew bright, and his face lightened at the thought. I will not defer it for an hour."

"These are but tricks and wiles to urge you on," cried Nicholas.

"I'll hear no more," said Madeline, hurriedly, "I have heard too much—more than I should—already. What I have said to you, Sir, I have said as to that dear friend to whom I trust in you honourably to repeat it. Some time hence when I am more composed and reconciled to my new mode of life, if I should live so long, I will write to him. Meantime, all holy angels shower their blessings on his head, and prosper and preserve him."

She was hurrying past Nicholas, when he threw himself before her, and implored her to think but once again upon the fate to which she was precipitately hastening.

"There is no retreat," said Nicholas, in an agony of supplication, "no withdrawing; all regret will be unavailing, and deep and bitter it must be. What can I say that will induce you to pause at this last moment! What can I do to save you!"

"Nothing," she incoherently replied. "This is the hardest trial I have had. Have mercy on me, Sir, I beseech, and do not pierce my heart with such appeals as these. I—I hear him calling; I—I—must not, will not, remain here for another instant."

"If this were a plot," said Nicholas, with the same violent rapidity with which she spoke, "a plot, not yet laid bare by me, but which, with time, I might unravel, if you were (not knowing it) entitled to fortune of your own, which, being recovered, would do all that this marriage can accomplish, would you not retract?"

"No, no, no!—It is impossible; it is a child's tale. Time would bring his death. He is calling again."

"It may be the last time we shall ever meet on earth," said Nicholas, "it may be better for me that we should never meet more."

"For both—for both," replied Madeline, not heeding what she said. "The time will come when to recall the memory of this one interview might drive me mad. Be sure to tell them that you left me calm and happy. And

God be with you, Sir, and my grateful heart and blessing!"

She was gone, and Nicholas, staggering from the house, thought of the hurried scene which had just closed upon him, as if it were the phantom of some wild, unquiet dream. The day wore on; at night, having been enabled in some measure to collect his thoughts, he issued forth again.

That night, being the last of Arthur Gride's bachelorship, found him in tip-top spirits and great glee. The bottle-green suit had been brushed ready for the morrow. Peg Sliderskew had rendered the accounts of her past housekeeping; the eighteenpence had been rigidly accounted for (she was never trusted with a larger sum at once, and the accounts were not usually balanced more than twice a-day) every preparation had been made for the coming festival, and Arthur might have sat down and contemplated his approaching happiness, but that he preferred sitting down and contemplating the entries in a dirty old vellum-book with rusty clasps.

"Well-a-day!" he chuckled, as sinking on his knees before a strong chest screwed down to the floor, he thrust in his arm nearly up to the shoulder, and slowly drew worth his greasy volume, "Well-a-day now, this is all my library, but it's one of the most entertaining books that were ever written; it's a delightful book, and all true and real—that's the best of it—true as the Bank of England, and real as its gold and silver. Written by Arthur Gride—he, he, he! None of your story-book writers will ever make as good a book as this, I warrant me. It's composed for private circulation—for my own particular reading, and nobody else's. He, he!"

Muttering this soliloquy, Arthur carried his precious volume to the table, and, adjusting it upon a dusty desk, put on his spectacles, and began to pore among the leaves.

"It's a large sum to Mr. Nickleby," he said, in a dolorous voice. "Debt to be paid in full, nine hundred and seventy-five, four, three. Additional sum as per bond, five hundred pound. One thousand, four hundred and seventy-five pounds, four shillings, and threepence, to-morrow at twelve o'clock. On the other side though, there's the *per contra* by means of this pretty chick. But again there's the question whether I mightn't have brought all this about

myself. 'Faint heart never won fair lady.' Why was my heart so faint? Why didn't I boldly open it to Bray myself, and save one thousand four hundred and seventy-five, four, three!"

These reflections depressed the old usurer so much as to wring a feeble groan or two from his breast, and cause him to declare with uplifted hands that he would die in a workhouse. Remembering on further cogitation, however, that under any circumstances he must have paid, or handsomely compounded for, Ralph's debt, and being by no means confident that he would have succeeded had he undertaken his enterprise alone, he regained his equanimity, and chattered and mowed over more satisfactory items until the entrance of Peg Sliderskew interrupted him.

"Aha, Peg!" said Arthur, "what is it?" What is it now, Peg?"

"It's the fowl," replied Peg, holding up a plate containing a little—a very little one.—Quite a phenomenon of a fowl—so very small and skinny.

"A beautiful bird!" said Arthur, after inquiring the price, and finding it proportionate to the size. "With a rasher of ham, and an egg made into sauce, and potatoes, and greens, and an apple pudding, Peg, and a little bit of cheese, we shall have a dinner for an emperor. There'll only be she and me—and you, Peg, when we've done—nobody else."

"Don't you complain of the expense afterwards," said Mrs. Sliderskew, sulkily.

"I'm afraid we must live expensively for the first week," returned Arthur, with a groan, "and then we must make up for it. I won't eat more than I can help, and I know you love your old master too much to eat more than *you* can help, don't you, Peg?"

"Don't I what?" said Peg.

"Love your old master too much—"

"No, not a bit too much," said Peg.

"Oh dear, I wish the devil had this woman!" cried Arthur—"love him too much to eat more than you can help at his expense."

"At his what?" said Peg.

"Oh dear! She can never hear the most important word, and hears all the others!" whined Gride. "At his expense—you catamaran."

The last-mentioned tribute to the charms of Mrs. Sliderskew being uttered in a whisper, that lady assented to the general proposition by a harsh growl, which was accompanied by a ring at the street-door.

"There's the bell," said Arthur.

"Ay, ay; I know that," rejoined Peg.

"Then why don't you go?" bawled Arthur.

"Go where?" retorted Peg. "I ain't doing any harm here, am I?"

Arthur Gride in reply repeated the word "bell" as loud as he could roar, and his meaning being rendered further intelligible to Mrs. Sliderskew's dull sense of hearing by pantomime expressive of ringing at a street-door, Peg hobbled out, after sharply demanding why he hadn't said there was a ring before, instead of talking about all manner of things that had nothing to do with it, and keeping her half-pint of beer waiting on the steps.

"There's a change come over you, Mrs. Peg," said Arthur, following her out with his eyes. "What it means I don't quite know, but if it lasts we shan't agree together long, I see. You are turning crazy, I think, and if you are you must take yourself off, Mrs. Peg—or be taken off. All's one to me." Turning over the leaves of his book as he muttered this, he soon lighted upon something which attracted his attention, and forgot Peg Sliderskew and everything else in the engrossing interest of its pages.

The room had no other light than that which it derived from a dim and dirt-clogged lamp, whose lazy wick, being still further obscured by a dark shade, cast its feeble rays over a very little space, and left all beyond in heavy shadow. This, the money-lender had drawn so close to him, that there was only room between it and himself for the book over which he bent; and as he sat with his elbows on the desk, and his sharp cheek-bones resting on his hands, it only served to bring out his hideous features in strong relief, together with the little table at which he sat, and to shroud all the rest of the chamber in a deep sullen gloom. Raising his eyes and looking vacantly into this gloom as he made some mental calculation, Arthur Gride suddenly met the fixed gaze of a man.

"Thieves! thieves!" shrieked the usurer, starting up and folding his book to his breast. "Robbers! Murder!"

"What is the matter?" said the form, advancing.

"Keep off!" cried the trembling wretch. "Is it a man or a—a—"

"For what do you take me, if not for a man?" was the disdainful inquiry.

"Yes, yes," cried Arthur Gride, shading his eyes with his hand, "it is a man, and not a spirit. It is a man. Robbers! robbers!"

"For what are these cries raised—unless indeed you know me, and have some purpose in your brain?" said the stranger, coming close up to him. "I am no thief, fellow."

"What then, and how come you here?" cried Gride, somewhat re-assured, but still retreating from his visitor, "what is your name, and what do you want?"

"My name you need not know," was the reply. "I came here because I was shown the way by your servant. I have addressed you twice or thrice, but you were too profoundly engaged with your book to hear me, and I have been silently waiting until you should be less abstracted. What I want I will tell you, when you can summon up courage enough to hear and understand me."

Arthur Gride, venturing to regard his visitor more attentively, and perceiving that he was a young man of good mien and bearing, returned to his seat, and muttering that there were bad characters about, and that this, with former attempts upon his house, had made him nervous, requested his visitor to sit down. This however he declined.

"Good God! I don't stand up to have you at an advantage," said Nicholas (for Nicholas it was), as he observed a gesture of alarm on the part of Gride. "Listen to me. You are to be married to-morrow morning."

"N—n—no," rejoined Gride. "Who said I was? How do you know that?"

"No matter how," replied Nicholas, "I know it. The young lady who is to give you her hand hates and despises you. Her blood runs cold at the mention of your name—the vulture and the lamb, the rat and the dove, could not be worse matched than you and she. You see I know her."

Gride looked at him as if he were petrified with astonishment, but did not speak, perhaps lacking the power.

"You and another man, Ralph Nickleby by name, have hatched this plot between you," pursued Nicholas. "You pay him for his share in bringing about this sale of Mad-

eline Bray. You do. A lie is trembling on your lips, I see."

He paused; but, Arthur making no reply, resumed again.

"You pay yourself by defrauding her. How or by what means—for I scorn to sully her cause by falsehood or deceit—I do not know; at present I do not know, but I am not alone or single-handed in this business. If the energy of man can compass the discovery of your fraud and treachery before your death—if wealth, revenge, and just hatred can hunt and track you through your windings—you will yet be called to a dear account for this. We are on the scent already—judge you, that know what we do not, when we shall have you down."

He paused again, and still Arthur Gride glared upon him in silence.

"If you were a man to whom I could appeal with any hope of touching his compassion of humanity," said Nicholas, "I would urge upon you to remember the helplessness, the innocence, the youth of this lady; her worth and beauty, her filial excellence, and last, and more than all as concerning you more nearly, the appeal she has made to your mercy and your manly feeling. But I take the only ground that can be taken with men like you, and ask what money will buy you off. Remember the danger to which you are exposed. You see I know enough to know much more with very little help. Bate some expected gain, for the risk you save, and say what is your price."

Old Arthur Gride moved his lips, but they only formed an ugly smile and were motionless again.

"You think," said Nicholas, "that the price would not be paid. Miss Bray has wealthy friends who would coin their hearts to save her in such a strait as this. Name your price, defer these nuptials for but a few days, and see whether those I speak of shrink from the payment. Do you hear me?"

When Nicholas began, Arthur Gride's impression was that Ralph Nickleby had betrayed him; but as he proceeded he felt convinced that however he had come by the knowledge he possessed, the part he acted was a genuine one, and that with Ralph he had no concern. All he seemed to know for certain was, that he, Gride, paid Ralph's debt, but that to anybody who knew the circumstances of Bray's detention—even to Bray himself on

Ralph's own statement—must be perfectly notorious. As to the fraud on Madeline herself, his visitor knew so little about its nature or extent, that it might be a lucky guess or a hap-hazard accusation, and whether or no, he had clearly no key to the mystery, and could not hurt him who kept it close within his own breast. The allusion to friends and the offer of money Gride held to be mere empty vapouring for purposes of delay. "And even if money were to be had," thought Arthur Gride, as he glanced at Nicholas, and trembled with passion at his boldness and audacity, "I'd have that dainty chick for my wife, and cheat *you* of her, young smooth-face."

Long habit of weighing and noting well what clients said, and nicely balancing chances in his mind and calculating odds to their faces, without the least appearance of being so engaged, had rendered Gride quick in forming conclusions and arriving, from puzzling, intricate, and often contradictory premises, at very cunning deductions. Hence it was that as Nicholas went on he followed him closely with his own constructions, and when he ceased to speak was as well prepared as if he had deliberated for a fortnight.

"I hear you," he cried, starting from his seat, casting back the fastenings of the window-shutters, and throwing up the sash. "Help here! Help! Help!"

"What are you doing!" said Nicholas, seizing him by the arm.

"I'll cry robbers, thieves, murder, alarm the neighbourhood, struggle with you, let loose some blood, and swear you came to rob me if you don't quit my house," replied Gride, drawing in his head with a frightful grin, "I will."

"Wretch!" cried Nicholas.

"*You'll* bring your threats here, will you?" said Gride, whom jealousy of Nicholas and a sense of his own triumph had converted into a perfect fiend. "You, the disappointed lover—oh dear! He! he! he!—but you shan't have her, nor she you. She's my wife, my fond doting little wife. Do you think she'll miss you? Do you think she'll weep? I shall like to see her weep—I shan't mind it. She looks prettier in tears."

"Villain!" said Nicholas, choking with his rage.

"One minute more," cried Arthur Gride, "and I'll rouse the street with such screams as, if they were raised by any-

body else, should wake me even in the arms of pretty Madeline."

"You base hound!" said Nicholas, "if you were but a younger man——"

"Oh yes!" sneered Arthur Gride, "if I was but a younger man it wouldn't be so bad, but for me, so old and ugly—to be jilted by little Madeline for me!"

"Hear me," said Nicholas, "and be thankful I have enough command over myself not to fling you into the street, which no aid could prevent my doing if I once grappled with you. I have been no lover of this lady's. No contract or engagement, no word of love, has ever passed between us. She does not even know my name."

"I'll ask it for all that—I'll beg it of her with kisses," said Arthur Gride. "Yes, and she'll tell me, and pay them back, and we'll laugh together, and hug ourselves—and be very merry—when we think of the poor youth that wanted to have her, but couldn't, because she was bespoke by me."

This taunt brought such an expression into the face of Nicholas, that Arthur Gride plainly apprehended it to be the forerunner of his putting his threat of throwing him into the street in immediate execution, for he thrust his head out of the window, and holding tight on with both hands, raised a pretty brisk alarm. Not thinking it necessary to abide the issue of the noise, Nicholas gave vent to an indignant defiance, and stalked from the room and from the house. Arthur Gride watched him across the street, and then, drawing in his head, fastened the window as before, and sat down to take breath.

"If she ever turns pettish or ill-humoured, I'll taunt her with that spark," he said, when he had recovered. "She'll little think I know about him, and, if I manage it well, I can break her spirit by this means and have her under my thumb. I'm glad nobody came. I didn't call too loud. The audacity to enter my house, and open upon me—But I shall have a very good triumph to-morrow, and he'll be gnawing his fingers off, perhaps drown himself, or cut his throat! I shouldn't wonder! That would make it quite complete, that would—quite."

When he had become restored to his usual condition by these and other comments on his approaching triumph, Arthur Gride put away his book, and, having locked up the

chest with great caution, descended into the kitchen to warn Peg Sliderskew to bed, and to scold her for having afforded such ready admission to a stranger.

The unconscious Peg, however, not being able to comprehend the offence of which she had been guilty, he summoned her to hold the light while he made a tour of the fastenings, and secured the street-door with his own hands.

"Top bolt," muttered Arthur, fastening as he spoke, "bottom bolt—chain—bar—double-lock—and key out to put under my pillow! So if any more rejected admirers come, they may come through the key-hole. And now I'll go to sleep till half-past five, when I must get up to be married, Peg."

With that, he jocularly tapped Mrs. Sliderskew under the chin, and appeared, for the moment, inclined to celebrate the close of his bachelor days by imprinting a kiss on her shrivelled lips. Thinking better of it, however, he gave her chin another tap in lieu of that warmer familiarity, and stole away to bed.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE CRISIS OF THE PROJECT AND ITS RESULT.

THERE are not many men who lie abed too late or oversleep themselves on their wedding morning. A legend there is of somebody remarkable for absence of mind, who opened his eyes upon the day which was to give him a young wife, and forgetting all about the matter, rated his servants for providing him with such fine clothes as had been prepared for the festival. There is also a legend of a young gentleman who, not having before his eyes the fear of the canons of the church for such cases made and provided, conceived a passion for his grandmama. Both cases are of a singular and special kind, and it is very doubtful whether either can be considered as a precedent likely to be extensively followed by succeeding generations.

Arthur Gride had enrobed himself in his marriage garments of bottle-green, a full hour before Mrs. Sliderskew, shaking off her more heavy slumbers, knocked at his chamber door; and he had hobbled down stairs in full array and

smacked his lips over a scanty taste of his favourite cordial, ere that delicate piece of antiquity enlightened the kitchen with her presence.

"Faugh!" said Peg, grubbing, in the discharge of her domestic functions, among a scanty heap of ashes in the rusty grate, "Wedding indeed! A precious wedding! He wants somebody better than his old Peg to take care of him, does he? And what has he said to me many and many a time to keep me content with short food, small wages, and little fire? 'My will, Peg! my will!' says he, 'I'm a bachelor—no friends—no relations, Peg.' Lies! And now he's to bring home a new mistress, a baby-faced chit of a girl—if he wanted a wife, the fool, why couldn't he have one suitable to his age and that knew his ways? She won't come in my way, he says. No, that she won't, but you little think why, Arthur boy."

While Mrs. Sliderskew, influenced possibly by some lingering feelings of disappointment and personal slight occasioned by her old master's preference for another, was giving loose to these grumblings below stairs, Arthur Gride was cogitating in the parlour upon what had taken place last night.

"I can't think how he can have picked up what he knows," said Arthur, "unless I have committed myself—let something drop at Bray's, for instance, which has been overheard. Perhaps I may. I shouldn't be surprised if that was it. Mr. Nickleby was often angry at my talking to him before we got outside the door. I mustn't tell him that part of the business, or he'll put me out of sorts and make me nervous for the day."

Ralph was universally looked up to and recognised among his fellows as a superior genius, but upon Arthur Gride his stern unyielding character and consummate art had made so deep an impression, that he was actually afraid of him. Cringing and cowardly to the core by nature, Arthur Gride humbled himself in the dust before Ralph Nickleby, and even when they had not this stake in common, would have licked his shoes and crawled upon the ground before him rather than venture to return him word for word, or retort upon him in any other spirit than that of the most slavish and abject sycophancy.

To Ralph Nickleby's, Arthur Gride now betook himself according to appointment, and to Ralph Nickleby he re-

lated how that last night some young blustering blade, whom he had never seen, forced his way into his house and tried to frighten him from the proposed nuptials:—told, in short, what Nicholas had said and done, with the slight reservation upon which he had determined.

"Well, and what then?" said Ralph.

"Oh! nothing more," rejoined Gride.

"He tried to frighten you?" said Ralph, disdainfully, "and you *were* frightened I suppose, is that it?"

"I frightened him by crying thieves and murder," replied Gride. "Once I was in earnest, I tell you that, for I had more than half a mind to swear he uttered threats and demanded my life or my money."

"Oho!" said Ralph, eyeing him askew. "Jealous too!"

"Dear now, see that!" cried Arthur, rubbing his hands and affecting to laugh.

"Why do you make those grimaces, man?" said Ralph, harshly, "you *are* jealous—and with good cause I think."

"No, no, no,—not with good cause, hey? You don't think with good cause, do you?" cried Arthur, faltering, "Do you though—hey?"

"Why, how stands the fact?" returned Ralph. "Here is an old man about to be forced in marriage upon a girl, and to this old man there comes a handsome young fellow —you said he was handsome, didn't you?"

"No!" snarled Arthur Gride.

"Oh!" rejoined Ralph, "I thought you did. Well, handsome or not handsome, to this old man there comes a young fellow who casts all manner of fierce defiances in his teeth —gums I should rather say—and tells him in plain terms that his mistress hates him. What does he do that for? Philanthropy's sake?"

"Not for love of the lady," replied Gride, "for he said that no word of love—his very words—had ever passed between 'em."

"He said!" repeated Ralph, contemptuously. "But I like him for one thing, and that is his giving you this fair warning to keep your—what is it? Tit-tit or dainty chick —which?—under lock and key. Be careful, Gride, be careful. It's a triumph too to tear her away from a gallant young rival; a great triumph for an old man. It only remains to keep her safe when you have her—that's all."

"What a man it is!" cried Arthur Gride, affecting in

the extremity of his torture to be highly amused. And then he added, anxiously, "Yes; to keep her safe, that's all. And that isn't much, is it?"

"Much!" said Ralph, with a sneer. "Why, everybody knows what easy things to understand and to control, women are. But come, it's very nearly time for you to be made happy. You'll pay the bond now I suppose, to save us trouble afterwards."

"Oh what a man you are!" croaked Arthur.

"Why not?" said Ralph. "Nobody will pay you interest for the money, I suppose, between this and twelve o'clock, will they?"

"But nobody would pay you interest for it either, you know," returned Arthur, leering at Ralph with all the cunning and slyness he could throw into his face.

"Besides which," said Ralph, suffering his lip to curl into a smile, "you haven't the money about you, and you weren't prepared for this or you'd have brought it with you, and there's nobody you'd so much like to accommodate as me. I see. We trust each other in about an equal degree. Are you ready?"

Gride, who had done nothing but grin, and nod, and chatter, during this last speech of Ralph's, answered in the affirmative, and producing from his hat a couple of large white favours, pinned one on his breast, and with considerable difficulty induced his friend to do the like. Thus accoutred they got into a hired coach which Ralph had in waiting, and drove to the residence of the fair and most wretched bride.

Gride, whose spirits and courage had gradually failed him more and more as they approached nearer and nearer to the house, was utterly dismayed and cowed by the mournful silence which pervaded it. The face of the poor servant-girl, the only person they saw, was disfigured with tears and want of sleep. There was nobody to receive or welcome them; and they stole up stairs into the usual sitting-room more like two burglars than the bridegroom and his friend.

"One would think," said Ralph, speaking in spite of himself in a low and subdued voice, "that there was a funeral going on here, and not a wedding."

"He, he!" tittered his friend, "you are so—so very funny!"

"I need be," remarked Ralph, drily, "for this is rather dull and chilling. Look a little brisker, man, and not so hang-dog like."

"Yes, yes, I will," said Gride. "But—but—you don't think she's coming just yet, do you?"

"Why, I suppose she'll not come till she is obliged," returned Ralph, looking at his watch, "and she has a good half-hour to spare yet. Curb your impatience."

"I—I—am not impatient," stammered Arthur. "I wouldn't be hard with her for the world. Oh dear, dear, not on any account. Let her take her time—her own time. Her time shall be ours by all means."

While Ralph bent upon his trembling friend a keen look, which showed that he perfectly understood the reason of this great consideration and regard, a footstep was heard upon the stairs, and Bray himself came into the room on tiptoe, and holding up his hand with a cautious gesture as if there were some sick person near who must not be disturbed.

"Hush!" he said in a low voice. "She was very ill last night. I thought she would have broken her heart. She is dressed, and crying bitterly in her own room; but she's better, and quite quiet—that's everything!"

"She is ready, is she?" said Ralph.

"Quite ready," returned the father.

"And not likely to delay us by any young-lady weaknesses—fainting, or so forth," said Ralph.

"She may be safely trusted now," returned Bray. "I have been talking to her this morning. Here—come a little this way."

He drew Ralph Nickleby to the further end of the room, and pointed towards Gride, who sat huddled together in a corner fumbling nervously with the buttons of his coat, and exhibiting a face of which every skulking and base expression was sharpened and aggravated to the utmost by his anxiety and trepidation.

"Look at that man," whispered Bray, emphatically. "This seems a cruel thing, after all."

"What seems a cruel thing?" inquired Ralph, with as much stolidity of face as if he really were in utter ignorance of the other's meaning.

"This marriage," answered Bray. "Don't ask me what. You know quite as well as I do."

Ralph shrugged his shoulders in silent deprecation of

Bray's impatience, and elevated his eyebrows, and pursed his lips, as men do when they are prepared with a sufficient answer to some remark, but wait for a more favourable opportunity of advancing it, or think it scarcely worth while to answer their adversary at all.

"Look at him. Does it not seem cruel?" said Bray.

"No!" replied Ralph boldly.

"I say it does," retorted Bray, with a show of much irritation. "It is a cruel thing, by all that's bad and treacherous!"

When men are about to commit or to sanction the commission of some injustice, it is not all uncommon for them to express pity for the object either of that or some parallel proceeding, and to feel themselves at the time quite virtuous and moral, and immensely superior to those who express no pity at all. This is kind of upholding of faith above works, and is very comfortable. To do Ralph Nickleby justice, he seldom practised this sort of dissimulation; but he understood those who did, and therefore suffered Bray to say again and again with great vehemence that they were jointly doing a very cruel thing, before he again offered to interpose a word.

"You see what a dry, shrivelled, withered old chip it is," returned Ralph, when the other was at length silent. "If he were younger, it might be cruel, but as it is—harkee, Mr. Bray, he'll die soon, and leave her a rich young widow. Miss Madeline consults your taste this time; let her consult her own next."

"True, true," said Bray, biting his nails, and plainly very ill at ease. "I couldn't do anything better for her than advise her to accept these proposals, could I? Now, I ask you, Nickleby, as a man of the world—could I?"

"Surely not," answered Ralph. "I tell you what, Sir—there are a hundred fathers within a circuit of five miles from this place; well off; good, rich, substantial men; who would gladly give their daughters, and their own ears with them, to that very man yonder, ape and mummy as he looks."

"So there are!" exclaimed Bray, eagerly catching at anything which seemed a justification of himself. "And so I told her, both last night and to-day."

"You told her truth," said Ralph, "and did well to do so; though I must say, at the same time, that if I had a

daughter, and my freedom, pleasure, nay, my very health and life, depended on her taking a husband whom I pointed out, I should hope it would not be necessary to advance any other arguments to induce her to consent to my wishes."

Bray looked at Ralph, as if to see whether he spoke in earnest, and having nodded twice or thrice in unqualified assent to what had fallen from him, said:

"I must go up stairs for a few minutes to finish dressing, and when I come down, I'll bring Madeline with me. Do you know I had a very strange dream last night, which I have not remembered till this instant? I dreamt that it was this morning, and you and I had been talking, as we have been this minute; that I went up stairs, for the very purpose for which I am going now; and that as I stretched out my hand to take Madeline's, and lead her down, the floor sank with me, and after falling from such an indescribable and tremendous height as the imagination scarcely conceives except in dreams, I alighted in a grave."

"And you awoke, and found you were lying on your back, or with your head hanging over the bedside, or suffering some pain from indigestion?" said Ralph. "Pshaw, Mr. Bray! Do as I do (you will have the opportunity, now that a constant round of pleasure and enjoyment opens upon you), and, occupying yourself a little more by day, have no time to think of what you dream by night."

Ralph followed him with a steady look to the door, and turning to the bridegroom, when they were again alone, said,

"Mark my words, Gride, you won't have to pay *his* annuity very long. You have the devil's luck in bargains, always. If he is not booked to make the long voyage before many months are past and gone, I wear an orange for a head!"

To this prophecy, so agreeable to his ears, Arthur returned no answer than a cackle of great delight, and Ralph, throwing himself into a chair, they both sat waiting in profound silence. Ralph was thinking with a sneer upon his lips on the altered manner of Bray that day, and how soon their fellowship in a bad design had lowered his pride and established a familiarity between them, when his attentive ear caught the rustling of a female dress upon the stairs, and the footstep of a man.

"Wake up," he said, stamping his foot impatiently upon the ground, "and be something like life, man, will you? They are here. Urge those dry old bones of yours this way. Quick, man, quick!"

Gride shambled forward, and stood leering and bowing close by Ralph's side, when the door opened and there entered in haste—not Bray and his daughter, but Nicholas and his sister Kate.

If some tremendous apparition from the world of shadows had suddenly presented itself before him, Ralph Nickleby could not have been more thunder-stricken than he was by this surprise. His hands fell powerless by his side, he staggered back, and with open mouth, and a face of ashy paleness, stood gazing at them in speechless rage; his eyes so prominent, and his face so convulsed and changed by the passions which raged within him, that it would have been difficult to recognise in him the same stern, composed, hard-featured man he had been not a minute ago.

"The man that came to me last night!" whispered Gride, plucking at his elbow. "The man that came to me last night!"

"I see," muttered Ralph, "I know. I might have guessed as much before. Across my every path, at every turn, go where I will, do what I may, he comes!"

The absence of all colour from the face; the dilated nostril; the quivering of the lips which, though set firmly against each other, would not be still; showed what fierce emotions were struggling for the mastery with Nicholas. But he kept them down, and gently pressing Kate's arm to re-assure her, stood erect and undaunted, front to front with his unworthy relative.

As the brother and sister stood side by side, with a gallant bearing which became them well, a close likeness between them was apparent, which many, had they only seen them apart, might have failed to remark. The air, carriage, and very look and expression of the brother were all reflected in the sister, but softened and refined to the nicest limit of feminine delicacy and attraction. More striking still was some indefinable resemblance in the face of Ralph to both. While they had never looked more handsome, nor he more ugly; while they had never held themselves more proudly, nor he shrunk half so low; there never had been a time when this resemblance was so perceptible, or when

all the worst characteristics of a face rendered coarse and harsh by evil thoughts were half so manifest as now.

"Away!" was the first word he could utter as he literally gnashed his teeth. "Away! What brings you here? Liar—scoundrel—dastard—thief!"

"I come here," said Nicholas in a low deep voice, "to save your victim if I can. Liar and scoundrel you are, in every action of your life; theft is your trade; and double dastard you must be, or you were not here to-day. Hard words will not move me, nor would hard blows. Here I stand and will, till I have done my errand."

"Girl!" said Ralph, "retire! We can use force to him, but I would not hurt you if I could help it. Retire, you weak and silly wench, and leave this dog to be dealt with as he deserves."

"I will not retire," cried Kate, with flashing eyes and the red blood mantling in her cheeks. "You will do him no hurt that he will not repay. You may use force with me; I think you will, for I *am* a girl, and that would well become you. But if I have a girl's weakness, I have a woman's heart, and it is not you who in a cause like this can turn that from its purpose."

"And what may your purpose be, most lofty lady?" said Ralph.

"To offer to the unhappy subject of your treachery, at this last moment," replied Nicholas, "a refuge and a home. If the near prospect of such a husband as you have provided will not prevail upon her, I hope she may be moved by the prayers and entreaties of one of her own sex. At all events they shall be tried, and I myself, avowing to her father from whom I come and by whom I am commissioned, will render it an act of greater baseness, meanness, and cruelty in him if he still dares to force this marriage on. Here I wait to see him and his daughter. For this I came and brought my sister even into your vile presence. Our purpose is not to see or speak with you; therefore to you, we stoop to say no more."

"Indeed!" said Ralph. "You persist in remaining here, ma'am, do you?"

His niece's bosom heaved with the indignant excitement into which he had lashed her, but she gave him no reply.

"Now, Gride, see here," said Ralph. "This fellow—I

grieve to say, my brother's son: a reprobate and profligate, stained with every mean and selfish crime—this fellow, coming here to-day to disturb a solemn ceremony, and knowing that the consequence of his presenting himself in another man's house at such a time, and persisting in remaining there, must be his being kicked into the streets and dragged through them like the vagabond he is—this fellow, mark you, brings with him his sister as a protection, thinking we would not expose a silly girl to the degradation and indignity which is no novelty to him; and even after I have warned her of what must ensue, he still keeps her by him as you see and clings to her apron-strings like a cowardly boy to his mother's. Is this a pretty fellow to talk as big as you have heard him now?"

"And as I heard him last night," said Arthur Gride, "as I heard him last night when he sneaked into my house, and —he! he! he!—very soon sneaked out again, when I nearly frightened him to death. And *he* wanting to marry Miss Madeline too! Oh, dear! Is there anything else he'd like —anything else we can do for him, besides giving her up? Would he like his debts paid and his house furnished, and a few bank notes for shaving paper—if he shaves at all! He! he! he!"

"You will remain, girl, will you?" said Ralph, turning upon Kate again, "to be hauled down stairs like a drunken drab—as I swear you shall if you stop here? No answer! Thank your brother for what follows. Gride, call down Bray—and not his daughter. Let them keep her above."

"If you value your head," said Nicholas, taking up a position before the door, and speaking in the same low voice in which he had spoken before, and with no more outward passion than he had before displayed; "stay where you are!"

"Mind me and not him, and call down Bray," said Ralph.

"Mind yourself rather than either of us, and stay where you are!" said Nicholas.

"Will you call down Bray?" cried Ralph passionately.

"Remember that you come near me at your peril," said Nicholas.

Gride hesitated: Ralph, being by this time as furious as a baffled tiger, made for the door, and attempting to pass Kate clasped her arm roughly with his hand. Nicholas,

with his eyes darting fire, seized him by the collar. At that moment, a heavy body fell with great violence on the floor above, and an instant afterwards was heard a most appalling and terrific scream.

They all stood still, and gazed upon each other. Scream succeeded scream; a heavy pattering of feet succeeded; and many shrill voices clamouring together were heard to cry, "He is dead!"

"Stand off!" cried Nicholas, letting loose all the violent passion he had restrained till now, "if this is what I scarcely dare to hope it is, you are caught, villains, in your own toils."

He burst from the room, and, darting up stairs to the quarter from whence the noise proceeded, forced his way through a crowd of persons who quite filled a small bedchamber; and found Bray lying on the floor quite dead, and his daughter clinging to the body.

"How did this happen?" he cried, looking wildly about him.

Several voices answered together that he had been observed through the half-opened door reclining in a strange and uneasy position upon a chair; that he had been spoken to, several times, and not answering, was supposed to be asleep, until some person going in and shaking him by the arm, he fell heavily to the ground and was discovered to be dead.

"Who is the owner of this house?" said Nicholas, hastily.

An elderly woman was pointed out to him; and to her he said, as he knelt down and gently unwound Madeline's arms from the lifeless mass round which they were entwined: "I represent this lady's nearest friends, as her servant here knows, and must remove her from this dreadful scene. This is my sister to whose charge you confide her. My name and address are upon that card, and you shall receive from me all necessary directions for the arrangements that must be made. Stand aside, every one of you, and give me room and air for God's sake!"

The people fell back, scarce wondering more at what had just occurred, than at the excitement and impetuosity of him who spoke, and Nicholas, taking the insensible girl in his arms, bore her from the chamber and down stairs into the room he had just quitted, followed by his sister and the faithful servant, whom he charged to procure a coach, di-

rectly while he and Kate bent over their beautiful charge and endeavoured, but in vain, to restore her to animation. The girl performed her office with such expedition, that in a very few minutes the coach was ready.

Ralph Nickleby and Gride, stunned and paralysed by the awful event which had so suddenly overthrown their schemes (it would not otherwise, perhaps, have made much impression on them), and carried away by the extraordinary energy and precipitation of Nicholas, which bore down all before them, looked on at these proceedings like men in a dream or trance. It was not until every preparation was made for Madeline's immediate removal that Ralph broke silence by declaring she should not be taken away.

"Who says that?" cried Nicholas, starting from his knee and confronting them, but still retaining Madeline's lifeless hand in his.

"I!" answered Ralph, hoarsely.

"Hush, hush!" cried the terrified Gride, catching him by the arm again. "Hear what he says."

"Ay!" said Nicholas, extending his disengaged hand in the air, "hear what he says. That both your debts are paid in the one great debt of nature—that the bond, due to-day at twelve, is now waste paper—that your contemplated fraud shall be discovered yet—that your schemes are known to man, and overthrown by Heaven—wretches, that he defies you both to do your worst!"

"This man," said Ralph, in a voice scarcely intelligible, "this man claims his wife, and he shall have her."

"That man claims what is not his, and he should not have her if he were fifty men, with fifty more to back him," said Nicholas.

"Who shall prevent him?"

"I will."

"By what right I should like to know," said Ralph. "By what right I ask?"

"By this right—that, knowing what I do, you dare not tempt me further," said Nicholas, "and by this better right, that those I serve, and with whom you would have done me base wrong and injury, are her nearest and her dearest friends. In their name I bear her hence. Give way!"

"One word!" cried Ralph, foaming at the mouth.

"Not one," replied Nicholas, "I will not hear of one—save this. Look to yourself, and heed this warning that I give you! Your day is past, and night is coming on."

"My curse, my bitter deadly curse, upon you, boy!"

"Whence will curses come at your command? Or what avails a curse or blessing from a man like you? I warn you, that misfortune and discovery are thickening about your head; that the structures you have raised through all your ill-spent life are crumbling into dust; that your path is beset with spies; that this very day, ten thousand pounds of your hoarded wealth have gone in one great crash!"

"'Tis false!" cried Ralph, shrinking back.

"'Tis true, and you shall find it so. I have no more words to waste. Stand from the door. Kate, do you go first. Lay not a hand on her, or on that woman, or on me, or so much as brush their garments as they pass you by!—You let them pass and he blocks the door again!"

Arthur Gride happened to be in the doorway, but whether intentionally or from confusion was not quite apparent. Nicholas swung him away with such violence as to cause him to spin round the room until he was caught by a sharp angle of the wall and there knocked down; and then taking his beautiful burden in his arms rushed violently out. No one cared to stop him, if any were so disposed. Making his way through a mob of people, whom a report of the circumstances had attracted round the house, and carrying Madeline in his great excitement as easily as if she were an infant, he reached the coach in which Kate and the girl were already waiting, and, confiding his charge to them, jumped up beside the coachman and bade him drive away.

CHAPTER LV.

OF FAMILY MATTERS, CARES, HOPES, DISAPPOINTMENTS, AND SORROWS.

Although Mrs. Nickleby had been made acquainted by her son and daughter with every circumstance of Madeline Bray's history which was known to them; although the responsible situation in which Nicholas stood had been carefully explained to her, and she had been prepared even for

the possible contingency of having to receive the young lady in her own house—improbable as such a result had appeared only a few minutes before it came about—still, Mrs. Nickleby, from the moment when this confidence was first reposed in her late on the previous evening, had remained in an unsatisfactory and profoundly mystified state, from which no explanations or arguments could relieve her, and which every fresh soliloquy and reflection only aggravated more and more.

"Bless my heart, Kate," so the good lady argued, "if the Mr. Cheerybles don't want this young lady to be married, why don't they file a bill against the Lord Chancellor, make her a Chancery ward, and shut her up in the Fleet prison for safety?—I have read of such things in the newspapers a hundred times; or, if they are so very fond of her as Nicholas says they are, why don't they marry her themselves—one of them I mean? And even supposing they don't want her to be married, and don't want to marry her themselves, why in the name of wonder should Nicholas go about the world forbidding people's banns?"

"I don't think you quite understand," said Kate, gently.

"Well I am sure, Kate, my dear, you're very polite!" replied Mrs. Nickleby. "I have been married myself I hope, and I have seen other people married. Not understand, indeed!"

"I know you have had great experience, dear mama," said Kate; "I mean that perhaps you don't quite understand all the circumstances in this instance. We have stated them awkwardly, I dare say."

"That I dare say you have," retorted her mother, briskly. "That's very likely. I am not to be held accountable for that; though, at the same time, as the circumstances speak for themselves, I shall take the liberty, my love, of saying that I do understand them, and perfectly well too, whatever you and Nicholas may choose to think to the contrary. Why is such a great fuss made because this Miss Magdalen is going to marry somebody who is older than herself? Your poor papa was older than I was—four years and a half older. Jane Dibabs—the Dibabses lived in the beautiful little thatched white house one story high, covered all over with ivy and creeping plants, with an exquisite little porch with twining honeysuckles and all sorts of things, where the earwigs used to fall into one's tea on

a summer evening, and always fell upon their backs and kicked dreadfully, and where the frogs used to get into the rushlight shades when one stopped all night, and sit up and look through the little holes like Christians—Jane Dibabs, *she* married a man who was a great deal older than herself, and would marry him, notwithstanding all that could be said to the contrary, and she was so fond of him that nothing was ever equal to it. There was no fuss made about Jane Dibabs, and her husband was a most honourable and excellent man, and everybody spoke well of him. Then why should there be any fuss about this Magdalen?"

"Her husband is much older; he is not her own choice; his character is the very reverse of that which you have just described. Don't you see a broad distinction between the two cases?" said Kate.

To this Mrs. Nickleby only replied that she durst say she was very stupid, indeed she had no doubt she was, for her own children almost as much as told her so, every day of her life; to be sure she was a little older than they, and perhaps some foolish people might think she ought reasonably to know best. However, no doubt she was wrong, of course she was—she always was—she couldn't be right, indeed—couldn't be expected to be—so she had better not expose herself any more; and to all Kate's conciliations and concessions for an hour ensuing, the good lady gave no other replies than—Oh, certainly—why did they ask *her*—*her* opinion was of no consequence—it didn't matter what *she* said—with many other rejoinders of the same class.

In this frame of mind (expressed, when she had become too resigned for speech, by nods of the head, upliftings of the eyes, and little beginnings of groans, converted as they attracted attention into short coughs), Mrs. Nickleby remained until Nicholas and Kate returned with the object of their solicitude; when, having by this time asserted her own importance, and becoming besides interested in the trials of one so young and beautiful, she not only displayed the utmost zeal and solicitude, but took great credit to herself for recommending the course of procedure which her son had adopted, frequently declaring, with an expressive look, that it was very fortunate things were *as* they were, and hinting, that but for great encouragement and wisdom

on her own part, they never could have been brought to that pass.

Not to strain the question whether Mrs. Nickleby had or had not any great hand in bringing matters about, it is unquestionable that she had strong ground for exultation. The brothers, upon their return, bestowed such commendations upon Nicholas for the part he had taken, and evinced so much joy at the altered state of events and the recovery of their young friend from trials so great and dangers so threatening, that, as she more than once informed her daughter, she now considered the fortunes of the family "as good as" made. Mr. Charles Cheeryble, indeed, Mrs. Nickleby positively asserted, had, in the first transports of his surprise and delight, "as good as" said so, and without precisely explaining what this qualification meant, she subsided, whenever she mentioned the subject, into such a mysterious and important state, and had such visions of wealth and dignity in perspective, that (vague and clouded though they were) she was at such times almost as happy as if she had really been permanently provided for on a scale of great splendour, and all her cares were over.

The sudden and terrible shock she had received, combined with the great affliction and anxiety of mind which she had for a long time endured, proved too much for Madeline's strength. Recovering from the state of stupefaction into which the sudden death of her father happily plunged her, she only exchanged that condition for one of dangerous and active illness. When the delicate physical powers which have been sustained by an unnatural strain upon the mental energies and a resolute determination not to yield, at last give way, their degree of prostration is usually proportionate to the strength of the effort which has previously upheld them. Thus it was that the illness which fell on Madeline was of no slight or temporary nature, but one which for a time threatened her reason, and—scarcely worse—her life itself.

Who, slowly recovering from a disorder so severe and dangerous, could be insensible to the unremitting attentions of such a nurse as gentle, tender, earnest Kate? On whom could the sweet soft voice, the light step, the delicate hand, the quiet, cheerful, noiseless discharge of those thousand little offices of kindness and relief which we feel so deeply when we are ill, and forget so lightly when we are well—

on whom could they make so deep an impression as on a young heart stored with every pure and true affection that women cherish; almost a stranger to the endearments and devotion of its own sex, save as it learnt them from itself; and rendered by calamity and suffering keenly susceptible of the sympathy so long unknown and so long sought in vain? What wonder that days became as years in knitting them together? What wonder, if with every hour of returning health, there came some stronger and sweeter recognition of the praises which Kate, when they recalled old scenes—they seemed old now, and to have been acted years ago—would lavish on her brother; where would have been the wonder even if those praises had found a quick response in the breast of Madeline, and if, with the image of Nicholas so constantly recurring in the features of his sister that she could scarcely separate the two, she had sometimes found it equally difficult to assign to each the feelings they had first inspired, and had imperceptibly mingled with her gratitude to Nicholas, some of that warmer feeling which she had assigned to Kate?

"My dear," Mrs. Nickleby would say, coming into the room with an elaborate caution, calculated to discompose the nerves of an invalid rather more than the entry of a horse-soldier at full gallop; "how do you find yourself to-night? I hope you are better?"

"Almost well, mama," Kate would reply, laying down her work, and taking Madeline's hand in hers.

"Kate!" Mrs. Nickleby would say, reprovingly, "don't talk so loud" (the worthy lady herself talking in a whisper that would have made the blood of the stoutest man run cold in his veins).

Kate would take this reproof very quietly, and Mrs. Nickleby, making every board creak and every thread rustle as she moved stealthily about, would add:

"My son Nicholas has just come home, and I have come, according to custom, my dear, to know from your own lips exactly how you are, for he won't take my account, and never will."

"He is later than usual to-night," perhaps Madeline would reply. "Nearly half an hour."

"Well, I never saw such people in all my life as you are for time up here!" Mrs. Nickleby would exclaim in great astonishment; "I declare I never did! I had not the least

idea that Nicholas was after his time—not the smallest. Mr. Nickleby used to say—your poor papa I am speaking of, Kate my dear—used to say that appetite was the best clock in the world, but you have no appetite, my dear Miss Bray, I wish you had, and upon my word I really think you ought to take something that would give you one; I am sure I don't know, but I have heard that two or three dozen native lobsters give an appetite, though that comes to the same thing after all, for I suppose you must have an appetite before you can take 'em. If I said lobsters, I meant oysters, but of course it's all the same, though really how you came to know about Nicholas——"

"We happened to be just talking about him, mama; that was it."

"You never seem to me to be talking about anything else, Kate, and upon my word I am quite surprised at your being so very thoughtless. You can find subjects enough to talk about sometimes, and when you know how important it is to keep up Miss Bray's spirits, and interest her and all that, it really is quite extraordinary to me what can induce you to keep on prose, prose, prose, din, din, din, everlastingly upon the same theme. You are a very kind nurse, Kate, and a very good one, and I know you mean very well; but I will say this—that if it wasn't for me, I really don't know what would become of Miss Bray's spirits, and so I tell the doctor every day. He says he wonders how I sustain my own, and I am sure I very often wonder myself how I can contrive to keep up as I do. Of course it's an exertion, but still, when I know how much depends upon me in this house, I am obliged to make it. There's nothing praiseworthy in that, but it's necessary, and I do it."

With that, Mrs. Nickleby would draw up a chair, and for some three quarters of an hour run through a great variety of distracting topics in the most distracting manner possible: tearing herself away at length on the plea that she must now go and amuse Nicholas while he took his supper. After a preliminary raising of his spirits with the information that she considered the patient decidedly worse, she would further cheer him up by relating how dull, listless, and low-spirited Miss Bray was, because Kate foolishly talked about nothing else but him and family matters. When she had made Nicholas thoroughly comfortable with

these and other inspiriting remarks, she would discourse at length on the arduous duties she had performed that day, and sometimes be moved to tears in wondering how, if anything were to happen to herself, the family would ever get on without her.

At other times when Nicholas came home at night, he would be accompanied by Mr. Frank Cheeryble, who was commissioned by the brothers to inquire how Madeline was that evening. On such occasions (and they were of very frequent occurrence), Mrs. Nickleby deemed it of particular importance that she should have her wits about her; for from certain signs and tokens which had attracted her attention, she shrewdly suspected that Mr. Frank, interested as his uncles were in Madeline, came quite as much to see Kate as to inquire after her; the more especially as the brothers were in constant communication with the medical man, came backwards and forwards very frequently themselves, and received a full report from Nicholas every morning. These were proud times for Mrs. Nickleby, and never was anybody half so discreet and sage as she, or half so mysterious withal; and never was there such cunning generalship, or such unfathomable designs, as she brought to bear upon Mr. Frank, with the view of ascertaining whether her suspicions were well founded, and if so, of tantalising him into taking her into his confidence and throwing himself upon her merciful consideration. Extensive was the artillery, heavy and light, which Mrs. Nickleby brought into play for the furtherance of these great schemes, and various and opposite the means which she employed to bring about the end she had in view. At one time she was all cordiality and ease, at another, all stiffness and frigidity. Now she would seem to open her whole heart to her unhappy victim, and the next time they met receive him with the most distant and studious reserve, as if a new light had broken in upon her, and guessing his intentions, she had resolved to check them in the bud; as if she felt it her bounden duty to act with Spartan firmness, and at once and for ever to discourage hopes which never could be realised. At other times, when Nicholas was not there to overhear, and Kate was up stairs busily tending her sick friend, the worthy lady would throw out dark hints of an intention to send her to France for three or four years, or to Scotland for the improvement of her health impaired by her late fa-

tigues, or to America on a visit, or anywhere that threatened a long and tedious separation. Nay, she even went so far as to hint obscurely at an attachment entertained for her daughter by the son of an old neighbour of theirs, one Horatio Peltirogus (a young gentleman who might have been at that time four years old, or thereabouts), and to represent it indeed as almost a settled thing between the families—only waiting for her daughter's final decision to come off with the sanction of the Church, and to the unspeakable happiness and content of all parties.

It was in the full pride and glory of having sprung this last mine one night with extraordinary success, that Mrs. Nickleby took the opportunity of being left alone with her son before retiring to rest, to sound him upon the subject which so occupied her thoughts: not doubting that they could have but one opinion respecting it. To this end, she approached the question with divers laudatory and appropriate remarks touching the general amiability of Mr. Frank Cheeryble.

"You are quite right, mother," said Nicholas, "quite right. He is a fine fellow."

"Good-looking, too," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"Decidedly good-looking," answered Nicholas.

"What may you call his nose, now, my dear?" pursued Mrs. Nickleby, wishing to interest Nicholas in the subject to the utmost.

"Call it?" repeated Nicholas.

"Ah!" returned his mother, "what style of nose—what order of architecture, if one may say so. I am not very learned in noses. Do you call it a Roman or a Grecian?"

"Upon my word, mother," said Nicholas, laughing, "as well as I remember, I should call it a kind of Composite, or mixed nose. But I have no very strong recollection upon the subject, and if it will afford you any gratification, I'll observe it more closely, and let you know."

"I wish you would, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, with an earnest look.

"Very well," returned Nicholas. "I will."

Nicholas returned to the perusal of the book he had been reading, when the dialogue had gone thus far. Mrs. Nickleby, after stopping a little for consideration, resumed.

"He is very much attached to you, Nicholas, my dear."

Nicholas laughingly said, as he closed his book, that he was glad to hear it, and observed that his mother seemed deep in their new friend's confidence already.

"Hem!" said Mrs. Nickleby. "I don't know about that, my dear, but I think it is very necessary that somebody should be in his confidence—highly necessary."

Elated by a look of curiosity from her son, and the consciousness of possessing a great secret all to herself, Mrs. Nickleby went on with great animation:

"I am sure, my dear Nicholas, how you can have failed to notice it is to me quite extraordinary; though I don't know why I should say that either, because of course as far as it goes, and to a certain extent, there is a great deal in this sort of thing, especially in this early stage, which however clear it may be to females, can scarcely be expected to be so evident to men. I don't say that I have any particular penetration in such matters. I may have; those about me should know best about that, and perhaps do know. Upon that point I shall express no opinion—it wouldn't become me to do so; it's quite out of the question —quite."

Nicholas snuffed the candles, put his hands in his pockets, and, leaning back in his chair, assumed a look of patient suffering and melancholy resignation.

"I think it my duty, Nicholas, my dear," resumed his mother, "to tell you what I know, not only because you have a right to know it too, and to know everything that happens in this family, but because you have it in your power to promote and assist the thing very much; and there is no doubt that the sooner one can come to a clear understanding upon such subjects, it is always better every way. There are a great many things you might do, such as taking a walk in the garden sometimes, or sitting up stairs in your own room for a little while, or making believe to fall asleep occasionally, or pretending that you recollected some business, and going out for an hour or so, and taking Mr. Smike with you. These seem very slight things, and I dare say you will be amused at my making them of so much importance; at the same time, my dear, I can assure you (and you'll find this out, Nicholas, for yourself one of these days, if you ever fall in love with anybody, as I trust and hope you will, provided she is respectable and well conducted, and of course you'd never dream of falling in love

with anybody who was not), I say, I can assure you that a great deal more depends upon these little things than you would suppose possible. If your poor papa was alive, he would tell you how much depended upon the parties being left alone. Of course you are not to go out of the room as if you meant it and did it on purpose, but as if it was quite an accident, and to come back again in the same way. If you cough in the passage before you open the door, or whistle carelessly, or hum a tune, or something of that sort, to let them know you're coming, it's always better; because of course, though it's not only natural, but perfectly correct and proper under the circumstances, still it is very confusing if you interrupt young people when they are—when they are sitting on the sofa, and—and all that sort of thing, which is very nonsensical perhaps, but still they will do it."

The profound astonishment with which her son regarded her during this long address, gradually increasing as it approached its climax, in no way discomposed Mrs. Nickleby, but rather exalted her opinion of her own cleverness; therefore, merely stopping to remark, with much complacency, that she had fully expected him to be surprised, she entered on a vast quantity of circumstantial evidence of a particularly incoherent and perplexing kind; the upshot of which was to establish, beyond the possibility of doubt, that Mr. Frank Cheeryble had fallen desperately in love with Kate.

"With whom?" cried Nicholas.

Mrs. Nickleby repeated, with Kate.

"What! *Our* Kate—my sister!"

"Lord, Nicholas!" returned Mrs. Nickleby, "whose Kate should it be, if not ours; or what should I care about it, or take any interest in it for, if it was anybody but your sister?"

"Dear mother," said Nicholas, "surely it can't be."

"Very good, my dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby, with great confidence. "Wait and see."

Nicholas had never, until that moment, bestowed one thought on the remote possibility of such an occurrence as that which was now communicated to him; for, besides that he had been much from home of late and closely occupied with other matters, his own jealous fears had prompted the suspicion that some secret interest in Madeline, akin to

that which he felt himself, occasioned those visits of Frank Cheeryble which had recently become so frequent. Even now, although he knew that the observation of an anxious mother was much more likely to be correct in such a case than his own, and although she reminded him of many little circumstances which, taken together, were certainly susceptible of the construction she triumphantly put upon them, he was not quite convinced but that they arose from mere good-natured thoughtless gallantry, which would have dictated the same conduct towards any other girl who was young and pleasing—at all events, he hoped so, and therefore tried to believe it.

"I am very much disturbed by what you tell me," said Nicholas, after a little reflection, "though I yet hope you may be mistaken."

"I don't understand why you should hope so," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I confess, but you may depend upon it I am not."

"What of Kate?" inquired Nicholas.

"Why that, my dear," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "is just the point upon which I am not yet satisfied. During this sickness, she has been constantly at Madeline's bedside—never were two people so fond of each other as they have grown—and to tell you the truth, Nicholas, I have rather kept her away now and then, because I think it's a good plan, and urges a young man on. He doesn't get too sure, you know."

She said this with such a mingling of high delight and self-congratulation, that it was inexpressibly painful to Nicholas to dash her hopes; but he felt that there was only one honourable course before him, and that he was bound to take it.

"Dear mother," he said kindly, "don't you see that if there really were any serious inclination on the part of Mr. Frank towards Kate, and we suffered ourselves for one moment to encourage it, we should be acting a most dishonourable and ungrateful part? I ask you if you don't see it, but I need not say that, I know you don't, or you would have been more strictly upon your guard. Let me explain my meaning to you—remember how poor we are."

Mrs. Nickleby shook her head, and said through her tears that poverty was not a crime.

"No," said Nicholas, "and for that very reason poverty

should engender an honest pride, that it may not lead and tempt us to unworthy actions, and that we may preserve the self-respect which a hewer of wood and drawer of water may maintain—and does better in maintaining than a monarch his. Think what we owe to these two brothers; remember what they have done and do every day for us with a generosity and delicacy for which the devotion of our whole lives would be a most imperfect and inadequate return. What kind of return would that be which would be comprised in our permitting their nephew, their only relative, whom they regard as a son, and for whom it would be mere childishness to suppose they have not formed plans suitably adapted to the education he has had, and the fortune he will inherit—in our permitting him to marry a portionless girl so closely connected with us, that the irresistible inference must be that he was entrapped by a plot; that it was a deliberate scheme and a speculation amongst us three. Bring the matter clearly before yourself, mother. Now, how would you feel if they were married, and the brothers coming here on one of those kind errands which bring them here so often, you had to break out to them the truth? Would you be at ease, and feel that you had played an honest, open part?"

Poor Mrs. Nickleby, crying more and more, murmured that of course Mr. Frank would ask the consent of his uncles first.

"Why, to be sure, that would place *him* in a better situation with them," said Nicholas, "but we should still be open to the same suspicions, the distance between us would still be as great, the advantages to be gained would still be as manifest as now. We may be reckoning without our host in all this," he added more cheerfully, "and I trust, and almost believe we are. If it be otherwise, I have that confidence in Kate that I know she will feel as I do, and in you, dear mother, to be assured that after a little consideration you will do the same."

After many more representations and entreaties, Nicholas obtained a promise from Mrs. Nickleby that she would try all she could to think as he did, and that if Mr. Frank persevered in his attentions she would endeavour to discourage them, or, at the least, would render him no countenance or assistance. He determined to forbear mentioning the subject to Kate until he was quite convinced there existed a

real necessity for his doing so, and resolved to assure himself, as well as he could by close personal observation, of the exact position of affairs. This was a very wise resolution, but he was prevented from putting it in practice by a new source of anxiety and uneasiness.

Smike became alarmingly ill; so reduced and exhausted that he could scarcely move from room to room without assistance, and so worn and emaciated that it was painful to look upon him. Nicholas was warned by the same medical authority to whom he had at first appealed, that the last chance and hope of his life depended on his being instantly removed from London. That part of Devonshire in which Nicholas had been himself bred when a boy, was named as the most favourable spot; but this advice was cautiously coupled with the information that whoever accompanied him thither must be prepared for the worst, for every token of rapid consumption had appeared, and he might never return alive.

The kind brothers, who were acquainted with the poor creature's sad history, despatched old Tim to be present at this consultation. That same morning, Nicholas was summoned by brother Charles into his private room, and thus addressed:

"My dear Sir, no time must be lost. This lad shall not die if such human means as we can use can save his life; neither shall he die alone, and in a strange place. Remove him to-morrow morning, see that he has every comfort that his situation requires, and don't leave him—don't leave him, my dear Sir, until you know that there is no longer any immediate danger. It would be hard indeed to part you now—no, no, no. Tim shall wait upon you to-night, Sir; Tim shall wait upon you to-night with a parting word or two. Brother Ned, my dear fellow, Mr. Nickleby waits to shake hands and say good bye; Mr. Nickleby won't be long gone; this poor chap will soon get better—very soon get better—and then he'll find out some nice homely country people to leave him with, and go backwards and forwards sometimes—backwards and forwards you know, Ned—and there's no cause to be down-hearted, for he'll very soon get better, very soon, won't he—won't he, Ned?"

What Tim Linkinwater said, or what he brought with him that night, needs not to be told. Next morning Nicholas and his feeble companion began their journey.

And who but one—and that one he who, but for those who crowded round him then, had never met a look of kindness, or known a word of pity—could tell what agony of mind, what blighted thoughts, what unavailing sorrow, were involved in that sad parting!

"See," cried Nicholas eagerly, as he looked from the coach window, "they are at the corner of the lane still! And now there's Kate—poor Kate, whom you said you couldn't bear to say good bye to—waving her handkerchief. Don't go without one gesture of farewell to Kate!"

"I cannot make it!" cried his trembling companion, falling back in his seat and covering his eyes. "Do you see her now? Is she there still?"

"Yes, yes!" said Nicholas earnestly. "There! She waves her hand again! I have answered it for you—and now they are out of sight. Do not give way so bitterly, dear friend, do not. You will meet them all again."

He whom he thus encouraged, raised his withered hands and clasped them fervently together.

"In heaven—I humbly pray to God—in heaven!"

It sounded like the prayer of a broken heart.

CHAPTER LVI.

RALPH NICKLEBY, BAFFLED BY HIS NEPHEW IN HIS LATE DESIGN, HATCHES A SCHEME OF RETALIATION WHICH ACCIDENT SUGGESTS TO HIM, AND TAKES INTO HIS COUNSELS A TRIED AUXILIARY.

THE course which these adventures shape out for themselves and imperatively call upon the historian to observe, now demands that they should revert to the point they attained previous to the commencement of the last chapter, when Ralph Nickleby and Arthur Gride were left together in the house where Death had so suddenly reared his dark and heavy banner.

With clenched hands, and teeth ground together so firm and tight that no locking of the jaws could for the time have fixed and riveted them more securely, Ralph stood for some minutes in the attitude in which he had last addressed

his nephew: breathing heavily, but as rigid and motionless in other respects as if he had been a brazen statue. After a time, he began by slow degrees, as a man rousing himself from heavy slumber, to relax. For a moment he shook his clasped fist stealthily and savagely towards the door by which Nicholas had disappeared, and then thrusting it into his breast as if to repress by force even this show of passion, turned round and confronted the less hardy usurer, who had not yet risen from the ground.

The cowering wretch, who still shook in every limb, and whose few grey hairs trembled and quivered on his head with abject dismay, tottered to his feet as he met Ralph's eye, and, shielding his face with both hands, protested while he crept towards the door that it was no fault of his.

"Who said it was, man?" returned Ralph, in a suppressed voice. "Who said it was?"

"You looked as if you thought I was to blame," said Gride, timidly.

"Pshaw!" Ralph muttered, forcing a laugh. "I blame him for not living an hour longer—one hour longer would have been long enough—I blame no one else."

"N—n—no one else?" said Gride.

"Not for this mischance," replied Ralph. "I have an old score to clear with that—that young fellow who has carried off your mistress, but that has nothing to do with his blustering just now, for we should soon have been quit of him, but for this cursed accident."

There was something so unnatural in the constrained calmness with which Ralph Nickleby spoke, when coupled with the livid face, the horrible expression of the features to which every nerve and muscle as it twitched and throbbed with a spasm whose workings no effort could conceal, gave every instant some new and frightful aspect—there was something so unnatural and ghastly in the contrast between his harsh, slow, steady voice (only altered by a certain halting of the breath which made him pause between almost every word like a drunken man bent upon speaking plainly), and these evidences of the most intense and violent passions, and the struggle he made to keep them under, that if the dead body which lay above had stood instead of him before the cowering Gride, it could scarcely have presented a spectacle which would have terrified him more.

"The coach," said Ralph after a time, during which he had struggled like some strong man against a fit. "We came in a coach. Is it—waiting?"

Gride gladly availed himself of the pretext for going to the window to see, and Ralph, keeping his face steadily the other way, tore at his shirt with the hand which he had thrust into his breast, and muttered in a hoarse whisper:—

"Ten thousand pounds! He said ten thousand! The precise sum paid in but yesterday for the two mortgages, and which would have gone out again at heavy interest to-morrow. If that house has failed, and he the first to bring the news!—Is the coach there?"

"Yes, yes," said Gride, startled by the fierce tone of the inquiry. "It's here. Dear, dear, what a fiery man you are!"

"Come here," said Ralph, beckoning to him. "We mustn't make a show of being disturbed. We'll go down arm in arm."

"But you pinch me black and blue," urged Gride, writhing with pain.

Ralph threw him off impatiently, and descending the stairs with his usual firm and heavy tread, got into the coach. Arthur Gride followed. After looking doubtfully at Ralph when the man asked where he was to drive, and finding that he remained silent, and expressed no wish upon the subject, Arthur mentioned his own house, and thither they proceeded.

On their way, Ralph sat in the furthest corner with folded arms, and uttered not a word. With his chin sunk upon his breast, and his downcast eyes quite hidden by the contraction of his knotted brows, he might have been asleep for any sign of consciousness he gave, until the coach stopped, when he raised his head, and, glancing through the window, inquired what place that was.

"My house," answered the disconsolate Gride, affected perhaps by its loneliness. "Oh dear! My house."

"True," said Ralph. "I have not observed the way we came. I should like a glass of water. You have that in the house, I suppose?"

"You shall have a glass of—of anything you like," answered Gride, with a groan. "It's no use knocking, coachman. Ring the bell."

The man rang, and rang, and rang again; then knocked

until the street re-echoed with the sounds; then listened at the keyhole of the door. Nobody came, and the house was silent as the grave.

"How's this?" said Ralph, impatiently.

"Peg is so very deaf," answered Gride with a look of anxiety and alarm. "Oh dear! Ring again, coachman. She *sees* the bell."

Again the man rang and knocked, and knocked and rang again. Some of the neighbours threw up their windows and called across the street to each other that old Gride's housekeeper must have dropped down dead. Others collected round the coach and gave vent to various surmises; some held that she had fallen asleep, some that she had burnt herself to death, some that she had got drunk; and one very fat man that she had seen something to eat which had frightened her so much (not being used to it) that she had fallen into a fit. This last suggestion particularly delighted the bystanders, who cheered it rather uproariously, and were with some difficulty deterred from dropping down the area and breaking open the kitchen door to ascertain the fact. Nor was this all, for rumours having gone abroad that Arthur was to be married that morning, very particular inquiries were made after the bride, who was held by the majority to be disguised in the person of Mr. Ralph Nickleby, which gave rise to much jocose indignation at the public appearance of a bride in boots and pantaloons, and called forth a great many hoots and groans. At length the two money-lenders obtained shelter in a house next door, and, being accommodated with a ladder, clambered over the wall of the back yard, which was not a high one, and descended in safety on the other side.

"I am almost afraid to go in, I declare," said Arthur, turning to Ralph when they were alone. "Suppose she should be murdered—lying with her brains knocked out by a poker—eh?"

"Suppose she were," said Ralph, hoarsely. "I tell you I wish such things were more common than they are, and more easily done. You may stare and shiver—I do!"

He applied himself to a pump in the yard, and, having taken a deep draught of water and flung a quantity on his head and face, regained his accustomed manner and led the way into the house, Gride following close at his heels.

It was the same dark place as ever: every room dismal

and silent as it was wont to be, and every ghostly article of furniture in its customary place. The iron heart of the old grim clock, undisturbed by all the noise without, still beat heavily within its dusty case; the tottering presses slunk from the sight as usual in their melancholy corners; the echoes of footsteps returned the same dreary sound; the long-legged spider paused in his nimble run, and, scared by the sight of men in that his dull domain, hung motionless upon the wall, counterfeiting death until they should have passed him by.

From cellar to garret went the two usurers, opening every creaking door and looking into every deserted room. But no Peg was there. At last they sat them down in the apartment which Arthur Gride usually inhabited, to rest after their search.

"The hag is out on some preparation for your wedding festivities, I suppose," said Ralph, preparing to depart. "See here. I destroy the bond; we shall never need it now."

Gride, who had been peering narrowly about the room, fell at that moment upon his knees before a large chest, and uttered a terrible yell.

"How now?" said Ralph, looking sternly round.

"Robbed! Robbed!" screamed Arthur Gride.

"Robbed! Of money?"

"No, no, no. Worse, far worse!"

"Of what then?" demanded Ralph.

"Worse than money, worse than money!" cried the old man, casting the papers out of the chest, like some beast tearing up the earth. "She had better have stolen money —all my money—I haven't much. She had better have made me a beggar, than have done this!"

"Done what?" said Ralph. "Done what, you devil's dotard?"

Still Gride made no answer, but tore and scratched among the papers, and yelled and screeched like a fiend in torment.

"There is something missing, you say," said Ralph, shaking him furiously by the collar. "What is it?"

"Papers, deeds. I am a ruined man—lost—lost! I am robbed, I am ruined! She saw me reading it—reading it of late—I did very often—She watched me—saw me put it in the box that fitted into this—the box is gone—she has stolen it. Damnation seize her, she has robbed me!"

"Of *what?*" cried Ralph, on whom a sudden light appeared to break, for his eyes flashed and his frame trembled with agitation as he clutched Gride by his bony arm. "Of what?"

"She don't know what it is; she can't read!" shrieked Gride, not heeding the inquiry. "There's only one way in which money can be made of it, and that is by taking it to *her*. Somebody will read it for her and tell her what to do. She and her accomplice will get money for it and be let off besides; they'll make a merit of it—say they found it—knew it—and be evidence against me. The only person it will fall upon is me—me—me!"

"Patience!" said Ralph, clutching him still tighter and eyeing him with a sidelong look, so fixed and eager as sufficiently to denote that he had some hidden purpose in what he was about to say. "Hear reason. She can't have been gone long. I'll call the police. Give you but information of what she has stolen, and they'll lay hands upon her, trust me.—Here! Help!"

"No, no, no," screamed the old man, putting his hand upon Ralph's mouth. "I can't, I daren't."

"Help! help!" cried Ralph.

"No, no, no," shrieked the other, stamping on the ground with the energy of a madman. "I tell you no. I daren't —I daren't!"

"Daren't make this robbery public?" said Ralph eagerly.

"No!" rejoined Gride, wringing his hands. "Hush! Hush! Not a word of this; not a word must be said. I am undone. Whichever way I turn, I am undone. I am betrayed. I shall be given up. I shall die in Newgate!"

With frantic exclamations such as these, and with many others in which fear, grief, and rage, were strangely blended, the panic-stricken wretch gradually subdued his first loud outcry until it had softened down into a low despairing moan, chequered now and then by a howl, as, going over such papers as were left in the chest, he discovered some new loss. With very little excuse for departing so abruptly, Ralph left him, and, greatly disappointing the loiterers outside the house by telling them there was nothing the matter, got into the coach and was driven to his own home.

A letter lay on his table. He let it lie there for some

time as if he had not the courage to open it, but at length did so and turned deadly pale.

"The worst has happened," he said, "the house has failed. I see—the rumour was abroad in the City last night, and reached the ears of those merchants. Well—well!"

He strode violently up and down the room and stopped again.

"Ten thousand pounds! And only lying there for a day—for one day! How many anxious years, how many pinching days and sleepless nights, before I scraped together that ten thousand pounds!—Ten thousand pounds! How many proud painted dames would have fawned and smiled, and how many spendthrift blockheads done me lip-service to my face and cursed me in their hearts, while I turned that ten thousand pounds into twenty! While I ground, and pinched, and used these needy borrowers for my pleasure and profit, what smooth-tongued speeches, and courteous looks, and civil letters, they would have given me! The cant of the lying world is, that men like me compass our riches by dissimulation and treachery, by fawning, cringing, and stooping. Why, how many lies, what mean and abject evasions, what humbled behaviour from upstarts who, but for my money, would spurn me aside as they do their betters every day, would that ten thousand pounds have brought me in!—Grant that I had doubled it—made cent. per cent.—for every sovereign told another—there would not be one piece of money in all that heap of coin which wouldn't represent ten thousand mean and paltry lies, told—not by the money-lender, oh no! but by the money-borrowers—your liberal, thoughtless, generous, dashing folks, who wouldn't be so mean as save a sixpence for the world!"

Striving as it would seem to lose part of the bitterness of his regrets in the bitterness of these other thoughts, Ralph continued to pace the room. There was less and less of resolution in his manner as his mind gradually reverted to his loss; and at length, dropping into his elbow-chair and grasping its sides so firmly that they creaked again, he said, between his set teeth:—

"The time has been when nothing could have moved me like the loss of this great sum—nothing, for births, deaths, marriages, and every event which is of interest to most

men, had (unless it is connected with gain or loss of money) no interest for me. But now, I swear, I mix up with the loss, his triumph in telling it. If he had brought it about, —I almost feel as if he had—I couldn't hate him more. Let me but retaliate upon him, by degrees, however slow—let me but begin to get the better of him, let me but turn the scale—and I can bear it."

His meditations were long and deep. They terminated in his despatching a letter by Newman, addressed to Mr. Squeers at the Saracen's Head, with instructions to inquire whether he had arrived in town, and if so, to wait an answer. Newman brought back the information that Mr. Squeers had come by mail that morning, and had received the letter in bed; but that he sent his duty, and word that he would get up and wait upon Mr. Nickleby directly.

The interval between the delivery of this message and the arrival of Mr. Squeers was very short; but, before he came, Ralph had suppressed every sign of emotion, and once more regained the hard, immovable, inflexible manner which was habitual to him, and to which, perhaps, was ascribable no small part of the influence which, over many men of no very strong prejudices on the score of morality, he could exert almost at will.

"Well, Mr. Squeers," he said, welcoming that worthy with his accustomed smile, of which a sharp look and a thoughtful frown were part and parcel:—"how do *you* do?"

"Why, Sir," said Mr. Squeers, "I'm pretty well. So's the family, and so's the boys, except for a sort of rash as is a running through the school, and rather puts 'em off their feed. But it's a ill wind as blows no good to nobody; that's what I always say when them lads has a wisitation. A wisitation, Sir, is the lot of mortality. Mortality itself, Sir, is a wisitation. The world is chock full of wisitations; and if a boy repines at a wisitation and makes you uncomfortable with his noise, he must have his head punched. That's going according to the Scripter, that is."

"Mr. Squeers," said Ralph, drily.

"Sir."

"We'll avoid these precious morsels of morality if you please, and talk of business."

"With all my heart, Sir," rejoined Squeers, "and first let me say——"

"First let *me* say, if you please.——Noggs!"

Newman presented himself when the summons had been twice or thrice repeated, and asked if his master called.

"I did. Go to your dinner. And go at once. Do you hear?"

"It an't time," said Newman, doggedly.

"My time is yours, and I say it is," returned Ralph.

"You alter it every day," said Newman. "It isn't fair."

"You don't keep many cooks, and can easily apologize to them for the trouble," retorted Ralph. "Begone, Sir!"

Ralph not only issued this order in his most peremptory manner, but, under pretence of fetching some papers from the little office, saw it obeyed, and, when Newman had left the house, chained the door to prevent the possibility of his returning secretly by means of his latch key.

"I have reason to suspect that fellow," said Ralph, when he returned to his own office. "Therefore, until I have thought of the shortest and least troublesome way of ruining him, I hold it best to keep him at a distance."

"It wouldn't take much to ruin him, I should think," said Squeers, with a grin.

"Perhaps not," answered Ralph. "Nor to ruin a great many people whom I know. You were going to say——?"

Ralph's summary and matter-of-course way of holding up this example and throwing out the hint that followed it, had evidently an effect (as doubtless it was designed to have) upon Mr. Squeers, who said, after a little hesitation and in a much more subdued tone:—

"Why, what I was a going to say, Sir, is, that this here business regarding of that ungrateful and hard-hearted chap Snawley senior, puts me out of my way, and occasions a inconveniency quite unparalleled; besides, as I may say, making, for whole weeks together, Mrs. Squeers a perfect widder. It's a pleasure to me to act with you, of course."

"Of course," said Ralph, drily.

"Yes, I say, of course," resumed Mr. Squeers, rubbing his knees, "but at the same time, when one comes, as I do now, better than two hundred and fifty mile to take a afferdavid, it does put a man out a good deal, letting alone the risk."

"And where may the risk be, Mr. Squeers?" said Ralph.

"I said, letting alone the risk," replied Squeers, evasively.

"And I said, where was the risk?"

"I wasn't complaining, you know, Mr Nickleby," pleaded Squeers. "Upon my word I never see such a——"

"I ask you where is the risk?" repeated Ralph, emphatically.

"Where the risk?" returned Squeers, rubbing his knees still harder. "Why, it an't necessary to mention—certain subjects is best awoided. Oh, you know what risk I mean."

"How often have I told you," said Ralph, "and how often am I to tell you, that you run no risk? What have you sworn, or what are you asked to swear, but that at such and such a time a boy was left with you in the name of Smike; that he was at your school for a given number of years, was lost under such and such circumstances, is now found, and has been identified by you in such and such keeping. This is all true—is it not?"

"Yes," replied Squeers, "that's all true."

"Well, then," said Ralph, "what risk do you run? Who swears to a lie but Snawley—a man whom I have paid much less than I have you?"

"He certainly did it cheap, did Snawley," observed Squeers.

"He did it cheap!" retorted Ralph, testily, "yes, and he did it well, and carries it off with a hypocritical face and a sanctified air, but you—risk! What do you mean by risk? The certificates are all genuine. Snawley *had* another son, he *has* been married twice, his first wife *is* dead, none but her ghost could tell that she didn't write that letter, none but Snawley himself can tell that this is not his son and that his son is food for worms. The only perjury is Snawley's, and I fancy he is pretty well used to it. Where's your risk?"

"Why, you know," said Squeers, fidgeting in his chair, "if you come to that, I might say where's yours?"

"You might say where's mine!" returned Ralph; "you may say where's mine. I don't appear in the business—neither do you. All Snawley's interest is to stick well to the story he has told, and all his risk is to depart from it in the least. Talk of *your* risk in the conspiracy!"

"I say," remonstrated Squeers, looking uneasily round; "don't call it that! Just as a favour, don't."

"Call it what you like," said Ralph, irritably, "but attend to me. This tale was originally fabricated as a means

of deep annoyance against one who hurt your trade and half cudgelled you to death, and to enable you to obtain repossession of a half-dead drudge, whom you wished to regain, because while you wreaked your vengeance on him for his share in the business, you knew that the knowledge that he was again in your power would be the best punishment you could inflict upon your enemy. Is that so, Mr. Squeers?"

"Why, Sir," returned Squeers, almost overpowered by the determination which Ralph displayed to make everything tell against him, and by his stern unyielding manner, "in a measure it was."

"What does that mean?" said Ralph, quietly.

"Why, in a measure, means," returned Squeers, "as it may be so; that it wasn't all on my account, because you had some old grudge to satisfy, too."

"If I had not had," said Ralph, in no way abashed by the reminder, "do you think I should have helped you?"

"Why no, I don't suppose you would," Squeers replied. "I only wanted that point to be all square and straight between us."

"How can it ever be otherwise?" retorted Ralph. "Except that the account is against me, for I spend money to gratify my hatred, and you pocket it, and gratify yours at the same time. You are at least as avaricious as you are revengeful—so am I. Which is best off? You, who win money and revenge at the same time and by the same process, and who are at all events sure of money, if not of revenge; or I, who am only sure of spending money in any case, and can but win bare revenge at last?"

As Mr. Squeers could only answer this proposition by shrugs and smiles, Ralph sternly bade him be silent, and thankful that he was so well off; and then, fixing his eyes steadily upon him, proceeded to say:—

First, that Nicholas had thwarted him in a plan he had formed for the disposal in marriage of a certain young lady, and had, in the confusion attendant upon her father's sudden death, secured that lady himself and borne her off in triumph.

Secondly, that by some will or settlement—certainly by some instrument in writing, which must contain the young lady's name, and could be therefore easily selected from others, if access to the place where it was deposited were once secured—she was entitled to property which, if the

existence of this deed ever became known to her, would make her husband (and Ralph represented that Nicholas was certain to marry her a rich and prosperous man, and most formidable enemy

Thirdly, that this deed had been, with others, stolen from one who had himself obtained or concealed it fraudulently, and who feared to take any steps for its recovery; and that he (Ralph) knew the thief.

To all this Mr. Squeers listened with greedy ears that devoured every syllable, and with his one eye and his mouth wide open: marvelling for what special reason he was honoured with so much of Ralph's confidence, and to what it all tended.

"Now," said Ralph, leaning forward, and placing his hand on Squeers's arm, "hear the design which I have conceived, and which I must—I say, must, if I can ripen it—have carried into execution. No advantage can be reaped from this deed, whatever it is, save by the girl herself, or her husband, and the possession of this deed by one or other of them is indispensable to any advantage being gained. *That* I have discovered beyond the possibility of doubt. I want that deed brought here, that I may give the man who brings it fifty pounds in gold, and burn it to ashes before his face."

Mr. Squeers, after following with his eye the action of Ralph's hand towards the fire-place as if he were at that moment consuming the paper, drew a long breath, and said:—

"Yes; but who's to bring it?"

"Nobody, perhaps, for much is to be done before it can be got at," said Ralph. "But if anybody—you."

Mr. Squeers's first tokens of consternation, and his flat relinquishment of the task, would have staggered most men, if they had not occasioned an utter abandonment of the proposition. On Ralph they produced not the slightest effect. Resuming when the schoolmaster had quite talked himself out of breath, as coolly as if he had never been interrupted, Ralph proceeded to expatiate on such features of the case as he deemed it most advisable to lay the greatest stress upon.

These were the age, decrepitude, and weakness of Mrs. Sliderskew; the great improbability of her having any accomplice or even acquaintance, taking into account her se-

cluded habits, and her long residence in such a house as Gride's; the strong reason there was to suppose that the robbery was not the result of a concerted plan, otherwise she would have watched an opportunity of carrying off a sum of money, or even of her being in want (to which the same argument applied); the difficulty she would be placed in when she began to think on what she had done, and found herself incumbered with documents of whose nature she was utterly ignorant; and the comparative ease with which somebody, with a full knowledge of her position, obtaining access to her and working upon her fears, if necessary, might worm himself into her confidence, and obtain, under one pretence or another, free possession of the deed. To these were added such considerations as the constant residence of Mr. Squeers at a long distance from London, which rendered his association with Mrs. Sliderskew a mere masquerading frolic, in which nobody was likely to recognise him, either at the time or afterwards; the impossibility of Ralph's undertaking the task himself, being already known to her by sight; and various comments upon the uncommon tact and experience of Mr. Squeers, which would make his overreaching one old woman a mere matter of child's play and amusement. In addition to these influences and persuasions, Ralph drew, with his utmost skill and power, a vivid picture of the defeat which Nicholas would sustain should they succeed, in linking himself to a beggar where he expected to wed an heiress—glanced at the immeasurable importance it must be to a man situated as Squeers, to preserve such a friend as himself—dwelt on a long train of benefits, conferred since their first acquaintance, when he had reported favourably of his treatment of a sickly boy who had died under his hands (and whose death was very convenient to Ralph and his clients, but this he did *not* say), and finally hinted that the fifty pounds might be increased to seventy-five, or in the event of very great success, even to a hundred.

These arguments at length concluded, Mr. Squeers crossed his legs and uncrossed them, and scratched his head, and rubbed his eye, and examined the palms of his hands, and bit his nails, and after exhibiting many other signs of restlessness and indecision, asked "whether one hundred pound was the highest that Mr. Nickleby could go." Being answered in the affirmative, he became rest-

less again, and after some thought, and an unsuccessful inquiry "whether he couldn't go another fifty," said he supposed he must try and do the most he could for a friend, which was always his maxim, and therefore he undertook the job.

"But how are you to get at the woman?" he said; "that's what it is as puzzles me."

"I may not get at her at all," replied Ralph, "but I'll try. I have hunted down people in this city before now who have been better hid than she, and I know quarters in which a guinea or two carefully spent will often solve darker riddles than this—ay, and keep them close too, if need be! I hear my man ringing at the door. We may as well part. You had better not come to and fro, but wait till you hear from me."

"Good!" returned Squeers. "I say, if you shouldn't find her out, you'll pay expenses at the Saracen, and something for loss of time?"

"Well," said Ralph, testily; "yes. You have nothing more to say?"

Squeers shaking his head, Ralph accompanied him to the street-door, and audibly wondering, for the edification of Newman, why it was fastened as if it were night, let him in and Squeers out, and returned to his own room.

"Now!" he muttered, doggedly. "Come what come may, for the present I am firm and unshaken. Let me but retrieve this one small portion of my loss and disgrace. Let me but defeat him in this one hope, dear to his heart as I know it must be. Let me but do this, and it shall be the first link in such a chain which I will wind about him, as never man forged yet."

CHAPTER LVII.

HOW RALPH NICKLEBY'S AUXILIARY WENT ABOUT HIS WORK, AND HOW HE PROSPERED WITH IT.

It was a dark, wet, gloomy night in autumn, when in an upper room of a mean house, situated in an obscure street or rather court near Lambeth, there sat, all alone, a one-eyed man grotesquely habited, either for lack of better gar-

ments or for purposes of disguise, in a loose great-coat, with arms half as long again as his own, and a capacity of breadth and length which would have admitted of his winding himself in it, head and all, with the utmost ease, and without any risk of straining the old and greasy material of which it was composed.

So attired, and in a place so far removed from his usual haunts and occupations, and so very poor and wretched in its character, perhaps Mrs. Squeers herself would have had some difficulty in recognising her lord, quickened though her natural sagacity doubtless would have been by the affectionate yearnings and impulses of a tender wife. But Mrs. Squeers's lord it was; and in a tolerably disconsolate mood Mrs. Squeers's lord appeared to be, as, helping himself from a black bottle which stood on the table beside him, he cast round the chamber a look in which very slight regard for the objects within view was plainly mingled with some regretful and impatient recollection of distant scenes and persons.

There were certainly no particular attractions, either in the room over which the glance of Mr. Squeers so discontentedly wandered, or in the narrow street into which it might have penetrated, if he had thought fit to approach the window. The attic-chamber in which he sat was bare and mean; the bedstead, and such few other articles of necessary furniture as it contained, of the commonest description, in a most crazy state, and of a most uninviting appearance. The street was muddy, dirty, and deserted. Having but one outlet, it was traversed by few but the inhabitants at any time, and the night being one of those on which most people are glad to be within doors, it now presented no other signs of life than the dull glimmering of poor candles from the dirty windows, and few sounds but the pattering of the rain, and occasionally, the heavy closing of some creaking door.

Mr. Squeers continued to look disconsolately about him, and to listen to these noises in profound silence, broken only by the rustling of his large coat, as he now and then moved his arm to raise his glass to his lips—Mr. Squeers continued to do this for some time, until the increasing gloom warned him to snuff the candle. Seeming to be slightly roused by this exertion, he raised his eyes to the ceiling, and fixing them upon some uncouth and fantastic

figures, traced upon it by the wet and damp which had penetrated through the roof, broke out into the following soliloquy:

"Well, this is a pretty go, is this here!—An uncommon pretty go! Here have I been a matter of how many weeks —hard upon six—a-follering up this here blessed old dowager petty larcenerer,"—Mr. Squeers delivered himself of this epithet with great difficulty and effort—"and Dotheboys Hall a-running itself regularly to seed the while! That's the worst of ever being in with a owdacious chap like that old Nickleby; you never know when he's done with you, and if you're in for a penny, you're in for a pound."

This remark perhaps reminded Mr. Squeers that he was in for a hundred pound; at any rate, his countenance relaxed, and he raised his glass to his mouth with an air of greater enjoyment of its contents than he had before evinced.

"I never see," soliloquised Mr. Squeers in continuation, "I never see nor come across such a file as that old Nickleby—never. He's out of everybody's depth, he is. He's what you may call a rasper, is Nickleby. To see how sly and cunning he grubbed on, day after day, a-worming and plodding and tracing and turning and twining of hisself about, till he found out where this precious Mrs. Peg was hid, and cleared the ground for me to work upon—creeping and crawling and gliding, like a ugly old, bright-eyed, stagnation-blooded adder! Ah! He'd have made a good un in our line, but it would have been too limited for him; his genius would have busted all bounds, and coming over every obstacle, broke down all before it, 'till it erected itself into a monneyment of—Well, I'll think of the rest, and say it when convenient."

Making a halt in his reflections at this place, Mr. Squeers again put his glass to his lips, and drawing a dirty letter from his pocket, proceeded to con over its contents with the air of a man who had read it very often, and now refreshed his memory rather in the absence of better amusement than for any specific information.

"The pigs is well," said Mr. Squeers, "the cows is well, and the boys is bobbish. Young Sprouter has been a-winking, has he? I'll wink him when I get back. 'Cobbey would persist in sniffing while he was a-eating his dinner, and said that the beef was so strong it made him.'—Very

good, Cobbey, we'll see if we can't make you sniff a little without beef. 'Pitcher was took with another fever,'—of course he was—'and being fetched by his friends, died the day after he got home,'—of course he did, and out of aggravation; it's part of a deep-laid system. There an't another chap in the school but that boy as would have died exactly at the end of the quarter, taking it out of me to the very last, and then carrying his spite to the utmost extremity. 'The juniorest Palmer said he wished he was in Heaven,'—I really don't know, I do not know what's to be done with that young fellow; he's always a-wishing something horrid. He said once he wished he was a donkey, because then he wouldn't have a father as didn't love him!—Pretty wicious that, for a child of six!"

Mr. Squeers was so much moved by the contemplation of this hardened nature in one so young, that he angrily put up the letter, and sought, in a new train of ideas, a subject of consolation.

"It's a long time to have been a-lingering in London," he said, "and this is a precious hole to come and live in, even if it has been only for a week or so. Still, one hundred pound is five boys, and five boys takes a whole year to pay one hundred pound, and there's their keep to be substracted, besides. There's nothing lost, neither, by one's being here; because the boys' money comes in just the same as if I was at home, and Mrs. Squeers she keeps them in order. There'll be some lost time to make up, of course—there'll be an arrear of flogging as 'll have to be gone through; still, a couple of days makes that all right, and one don't mind a little extra work for one hundred pound. It's pretty nigh the time to wait upon the old woman. From what she said last night, I suspect that if I'm to succeed at all, I shall succeed to-night, so I'll have half a glass more to wish myself success, and put myself in spirits. Mrs. Squeers, my dear, your health."

Leering with his one eye as if the lady to whom he drank had been actually present, Mr. Squeers—in his enthusiasm, no doubt—poured out a full glass, and emptied it; and as the liquor was raw spirits, and he had applied himself to the same bottle more than once already, it is not surprising that he found himself by this time in an extremely cheerful state, and quite enough excited for this purpose.

What this purpose was, soon appeared; for, after a few

turns about the room to steady himself, he took the bottle under his arm and the glass in his hand, and blowing out the candle as if he purposed being gone some time, stole out upon the staircase, and creeping softly to a door opposite his own, tapped gently at it.

"But what's the use of tapping?" he said, "she'll never hear. I suppose she isn't doing anything very particular, and if she is, it don't much matter that I see."

With this brief preface, Mr. Squeers applied his hand to the latch of the door, and thrusting his head into a garret far more deplorable than that he had just left, and seeing that there was nobody there but an old woman, who was bending over a wretched fire (for although the weather was still warm, the evening was chilly), walked in, and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Well, my Slider!" said Mr. Squeers, jocularly.

"Is that you?" inquired Peg.

"Ah! It's me, and me's the first person singular, nominative case, agreeing with the verb 'it's,' and governed by Squeers understood, as a acorn, a hour; but when the h is sounded, the a only is to be used, as a hand, a heart, a highway," replied Mr. Squeers, quoting at random from the grammar, "at least, if it isn't, you don't know any better, and if it is, I've done it accidentally."

Delivering this reply in his accustomed tone of voice, in which of course it was inaudible to Peg, Mr. Squeers drew a stool up to the fire, and placing himself over against her, and the bottle and glass on the floor between them, roared out again very loud,

"Well, my Slider!"

"I hear you," said Peg, receiving him very graciously.

"I've come according to promise," roared Squeers.

"So they used to say in that part of the country I come from," observed Peg, complacently, "but I think oil's better."

"Better than what?" shouted Squeers, adding some rather strong language in an under-tone.

"No," said Peg, "of course not."

"I never saw such a monster as you are!" muttered Squeers, looking as amiable as he possibly could, the while; for Peg's eye was upon him, and she was chuckling fearfully, as though in delight at having made a choice repartee. "Do you see this? This is a bottle."

"I see it," answered Peg.

"Well, and do you see *this?*" bawled Squeers. "This is a glass!" Peg saw that too.

"See here, then," said Squeers, accompanying his remarks with appropriate action, "I fill the glass from the bottle, and I say, 'your health, Slider,' and empty it; then I rinse it genteelly with a little drop, which I'm forced to throw into the fire—Hallo! we shall have the chimbley alight next—fill it again, and hand it over to you."

"*Your* health," said Peg.

"She understands that, anyway.," muttered Squeers, watching Mrs. Sliderskew as she dispatched her portion, and choked and gasped in a most awful manner after so doing; "now then, let's have a talk. How's the rheumatics?"

Mrs. Sliderskew, with much blinking and chuckling, and with looks expressive of her strong admiration of Mr. Squeers, his person, manners, and conversation, replied that the rheumatics were better.

"What's the reason," said Mr. Squeers, deriving fresh facetiousness from the bottle; "what's the reason of rheumatics? What do they mean? What do people have 'em for—eh?"

Mrs. Sliderskew didn't know, but suggested that it was possibly because they couldn't help it.

"Measles, rheumatics, hooping-cough, fevers, agues, and lumbagers," said Mr. Squeers, "is all philosophy together; that's what it is. The heavenly bodies is philosophy, and the earthly bodies is philosophy. If there's a screw loose in a heavenly body, that's philosophy; and if there's a screw loose in a earthly body, that's philosophy too; or it may be that sometimes there's a little metaphysics in it, but that's not often. Philosophy's the chap for me. If a parent asks a question in the classical, commercial, or mathematical line, says I, gravely, 'Why, Sir, in the first place, are you a philosopher?'—'No, Mr. Squeers,' he says, 'I an't.' 'Then, Sir,' says I, 'I am sorry for you, for I shan't be able to explain it.' Naturally the parent goes away and wishes he was a philosopher, and equally naturally, thinks I'm one."

Saying this and a great deal more with tipsy profundity and a serio-comic air, and keeping his eye all the time on Mrs. Sliderskew, who was unable to hear one word, Mr.

Squeers concluded by helping himself and passing the bottle, to which Peg did becoming reverence.

"That's the time of day!" said Mr. Squeers. "You look twenty pound ten better than you did."

Again Mrs. Sliderskew chuckled, but modesty forbade her assenting verbally to the compliment.

"Twenty pound ten better," repeated Mr. Squeers, "than you did that day when I first introduced myself—don't you know?"

"Ah!" said Peg, shaking her head, "but you frightened me that day."

"Did I?" said Squeers, "well, it was rather a startling thing for a stranger to come and recommend himself by saying that he knew all about you, and what your name was, and why you were living so quiet here, and what you had boned, and who you boned it from, wasn't it?"

Peg nodded her head in strong assent.

"But I know everything that happens in that way, you see," continued Squeers. "Nothing takes place of that kind that I an't up to entirely. I'm a sort of a lawyer, Slider, of first-rate standing, and understanding too; I'm the intimate friend and confidential adviser of pretty nigh every man, woman, and child that gets themselves into difficulties by being too nimble with their fingers, I'm——"

Mr. Squeers's catalogue of his own merits and accomplishments, which was partly the result of a concerted plan between himself and Ralph Nickleby, and flowed, in part, from the black bottle, was here interrupted by Mrs. Sliderskew.

"Ha, ha, ha!" she cried, folding her arms and wagging her head; "and so he wasn't married after all, wasn't he —not married after all?"

"No," replied Squeers, "that he wasn't!"

"And a young lover come and carried off the bride, eh?" said Peg.

"From under his very nose," replied Squeers; "and I'm told the young chap cut up rough besides, and broke the winders, and forced him to swaller his wedding favour, which nearly choked him."

"Tell me all about it again," cried Peg, with a malicious relish of her old master's defeat, which made her natural hideousness something quite fearful; "let's hear it all again, beginning at the beginning now, as if you'd never

told me. Let's have it every word—now—now—beginning at the very first, you know, when he went to the house that morning."

Mr. Squeers, plying Mrs. Sliderskew freely with the liquor, and sustaining himself under the exertion of speaking so loud by frequent applications to it himself, complied with this request by describing the discomfiture of Arthur Gride, with such improvements on the truth as happened to occur to him, and the ingenious invention and application of which had been very instrumental in recommending him to her notice in the beginning of their acquaintance. Mrs. Sliderskew was in an ecstacy of delight, rolling her head about, drawing up her skinny shoulders, and wrinkling her cadaverous face into so many and such complicated forms of ugliness, as awakened the unbounded astonishment and disgust even of Mr. Squeers.

"He's a treacherous old goat," said Peg, "and cozened me with cunning tricks and lying promises, but never mind —I'm even with him—I'm even with him."

"More than even, Slider," returned Squeers; "you'd have been even with him, if he'd got married, but with the disappointment besides, you're a long way ahead—out of sight, Slider, quite out of sight. And that reminds me," he added, handing her the glass, "if you want me to give you my opinion of them deeds, and tell you what you'd better keep and what you'd better burn, why, now's your time, Slider."

"There an't no hurry for that," said Peg, with several knowing looks and winks.

"Oh! very well!" observed Squeers, "it don't matter to me; you asked me, you know. I shouldn't charge you nothing, being a friend. You're the best judge of course, but you're a bold woman, Slider—that's all."

"How do you mean—bold?" said Peg.

"Why, I only mean that if it was me, I wouldn't keep papers as might hang me, littering about when they might be turned into money; them as wasn't useful made away with, and them as was, laid by somewheres safe, that's all," returned Squeers; "but everybody's the best judge of their own affairs. All as I say is, Slider, *I* wouldn't do it."

"Come," said Peg, "then you shall see 'em."

"*I* don't want to see 'em," replied Squeers, affecting to

be out of humour, "don't talk as if it was a treat. Show 'em to somebody else and take their advice."

Mr. Squeers would very likely have carried on the farce of being offended a little longer, if Mrs. Sliderskew, in her anxiety to restore herself to her former high position in his good graces, had not become so extremely affectionate that he stood at some risk of being smothered by her caresses. Repressing, with as good a grace as possible, these little familiarities—for which there is reason to believe that the black bottle was at least as much to blame as any constitutional infirmity on the part of Mrs. Sliderskew—he protested that he had only been joking, and, in proof of his unimpaired good humour, that he was ready to examine the deeds at once, if, by so doing, he could afford any satisfaction or relief of mind to his fair friend.

"And now you're up, my Slider," bawled Squeers, as she rose to fetch them, "bolt the door."

Peg trotted to the door, and after fumbling at the bolt, crept to the other end of the room, and from beneath the coals which filled the bottom of the cupboard, drew forth a small deal box. Having placed this on the floor at Squeers's feet, she brought, from under the pillow of her bed, a small key, with which she signed to that gentleman to open it. Mr. Squeers, who had eagerly followed her every motion, lost no time in obeying this hint: and, throwing back the lid, gazed with rapture on the documents which lay within.

"Now you see," said Peg, kneeling down on the floor beside him, and staying his impatient hand; "what's of no use, we'll burn; what we can get any money by, we'll keep; and if there's any we could get him into trouble by, and fret and waste away his heart to shreds, those we'll take particular care of; for that's what I want to do, and hoped to do when I left him."

"I thought," said Squeers, "that you didn't bear him any particular good-will. But, I say, why didn't you take some money besides?"

"Some what?" asked Peg.

"Some money," roared Squeers. "I do believe the woman hears me, and wants to make me break a wessel, so that she may have the pleasure of nursing me. Some money, Slider—money."

"Why, what a man you are to ask!" cried Peg, with

some contempt. "If I had taken money from Arthur Gride, he'd have scoured the whole earth to find me—ay, and he'd have smelt it out, and raked it up somehow if I had buried it at the bottom of the deepest well in England. No, no! I knew better than that. I took what I thought his secrets were hid in, and them he couldn't afford to make public, let 'em be worth ever so much money. He's an old dog, a sly, old, cunning, thankless dog. He first starved and then tricked me, and if I could, I'd kill him."

"All right, and very laudable," said Squeers. "But first and foremost, Slider, burn the box. You should never keep things as may lead to discovery—always mind that. So while you pull it to pieces (which you can easily do, for it's very old and rickety) and burn it in little bits, I'll look over the papers and tell you what they are."

Peg, expressing her acquiescence in this arrangement, Mr. Squeers turned the box bottom upwards, and tumbling the contents upon the floor, handed it to her; the destruction of the box being an extemporary device for engaging her attention, in case it should prove desirable to distract it from his own proceedings.

"There!" said Squeers; "you poke the pieces between the bars, and make up a good fire, and I'll read the while —let me see—let me see." And, taking the candle down beside him, Mr. Squeers, with great eagerness and a cunning grin overspreading his face, entered upon his task of examination.

If the old woman had not been very deaf, she must have heard, when she last went to the door, the breathing of two persons close behind it, and if those two persons had been unacquainted with her infirmity they must probably have chosen that moment either for presenting themselves or taking to flight. But, knowing with whom they had to deal, they remained quite still, and now, not only appeared unobserved at the door—which was not bolted, for the bolt had no hasp—but warily, and with noiseless footsteps, advanced into the room.

As they stole farther and farther in by slight and scarcely perceptible degrees, and with such caution that they scarcely seemed to breathe, the old hag and Squeers, little dreaming of any such invasion, and utterly unconscious of there being any soul near but themselves, were busily occupied with their tasks. The old woman, with her wrinkled face

close to the bars of the stove, puffing at the dull embers which had not yet caught the wood—Squeers, stooping down to the candle, which brought out the full ugliness of his face, as the light of the fire did that of his companion —both intently engaged, and wearing faces of exultation which contrasted strongly with the anxious looks of those behind, who took advantage of the slightest sound to cover their advance, and almost before they had moved an inch, and all was silent, stopped again—this, with the large bare room, damp walls, and flickering doubtful light, combined to form a scene which the most careless and indifferent spectator (could any have been present) could scarcely have failed to derive some interest from, and would not readily have forgotten.

Of the stealthy comers Frank Cheeryble was one, and Newman Noggs the other. Newman had caught up by the rusty nozzle an old pair of bellows, which were just undergoing a flourish in the air preparatory to a descent upon the head of Mr. Squeers, when Frank with an earnest gesture stayed his arm, and, taking another step in advance, came so close behind the schoolmaster that, by leaning slightly forward, he could plainly distinguish the writing which he held up to his eye.

Mr. Squeers, not being remarkably erudite, appeared to be considerably puzzled by this first prize, which was in an engrossing hand, and not very legible except to a practised eye. Having tried it by reading from left to right and from right to left, and finding it equally clear both ways, he turned it upside down with no better success.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Peg, who, on her knees before the fire, was feeding it with fragments of the box, and grinning in most devilish exultation. "What's that writing about, eh?"

"Nothing particular," replied Squeers, tossing it towards her. "It's only an old lease, as well as I can make out. Throw it in the fire."

Mrs. Sliderskew complied, and inquired what the next one was.

"This," said Squeers, "is a bundle of overdue acceptances and renewed bills of six or eight young gentlemen, but they're all M.P.'s, so it's of no use to anybody. Throw it in the fire."

Peg did as she was bidden, and waited for the next.

"This," said Squeers, "seems to be some deed of sale of the right of presentation to the rectory of Purechurch, in the valley of Cashup. Take care of that, Slider—literally for God's sake. It'll fetch its price at the Auction Mart."

"What's the next?" inquired Peg.

"Why, this," said Squeers, "seems, from the two letters that's with it, to be a bond from a curate down in the country to pay half-a-year's wages of forty pound for borrowing twenty. Take care of that, for if he don't pay it, his bishop will very soon be down upon him. We know what the camel and the needle's eye means—no man as can't live upon his income, whatever it is, must expect to go to heaven at any price—it's very odd. I don't see anything like it yet."

"What's the matter?" said Peg.

"Nothing," replied Squeers, "only I'm looking for——"

Newman raised the bellows again, and once more Frank, by a rapid motion of his arm, unaccompanied by any noise, checked him in his purpose.

"Here you are," said Squeers, "bonds—take care of them. Warrant of attorney—take care of that. Two cog novits—take care of them. Lease and release—burn that. Ah! 'Madeline Bray—come of age or marry—the said Madeline'—here, burn *that*."

Eagerly throwing towards the old woman a parchment that he caught up for the purpose, Squeers, as she turned her head, thrust into the breast of his large coat, the deed in which these words had caught his eyes, and burst into a shout of triumph.

"I've got it!" said Squeers. "I've got it. Hurrah! The plan was a good one though the chance was desperate, and the day's our own at last!"

Peg demanded what he laughed at, but no answer was returned, for Newman's arm could no longer be restrained; the bellows descending heavily and with unerring aim on the very centre of Mr. Squeers's head, felled him to the floor, and stretched him on it flat and senseless.

CHAPTER LVIII.

IN WHICH ONE SCENE OF THIS HISTORY IS CLOSED.

Dividing the distance into two days' journey, in order that his charge might sustain the less exhaustion and fatigue from travelling so far, Nicholas, at the end of the second day from their leaving home, found himself within a very few miles of the spot where the happiest years of his life had been passed, and which, while it filled his mind with pleasant and peaceful thoughts, brought back many painful and vivid recollections of the circumstances in which he and his had wandered forth from their old home, cast upon the rough world and the mercy of strangers.

It needed no such reflections as those which the memory of old days, and wanderings among scenes where our childhood has been passed, usually awaken in the most insensible minds, to soften the heart of Nicholas, and render him more than usually mindful of his drooping friend. By night and day, at all times and seasons, always watchful, attentive, solicitous, and never varying in the discharge of his self-imposed duty to one so friendless and helpless as he whose sands of life were now fast running out and dwindling rapidly away, he was ever at his side. He never left him; to encourage and animate him, administer to his wants, support and cheer him to the utmost of his power, was now his constant and unceasing occupation.

They procured a humble lodging in a small farm-house, surrounded by meadows, where Nicholas had often revelled when a child with a group of merry school-fellows; and here they took up their rest.

At first, Smike was strong enough to walk about for short distances at a time, with no other support or aid than that which Nicholas could afford him. At this time, nothing appeared to interest him so much as visiting those places which had been most familiar to his friend in bygone days. Yielding to this fancy, and pleased to find that its indulgence beguiled the sick boy of many tedious hours, and never failed to afford him matter for thought and conversation afterwards, Nicholas made such spots the scenes of

their daily rambles: driving him from place to place in a little pony-chair, and supporting him on his arm while they walked slowly among these old haunts, or lingered in the sunlight to take long parting looks of those which were most quiet and beautiful.

It was on such occasions as these, that Nicholas, yielding almost unconsciously to the interest of old associations, would point out some tree that he had climbed a hundred times to peep at the young birds in their nest, and the branch from which he used to shout to little Kate, who stood below terrified at the height he had gained, and yet urging him higher still by the intensity of her admiration. There was the old house too, which they would pass every day, looking up at the tiny window through which the sun used to stream in and wake him on the summer mornings—they were all summer mornings then—and, climbing up the garden-wall and looking over, Nicholas could see the very rose-bush which had come, a present to Kate, from some little lover, and she had planted with her own hands. There were the hedgerows where the brother and sister had so often gathered wild flowers together, and the green fields and shady paths where they had so often strayed. There was not a lane, or brook, or copse, or cottage near, with which some childish event was not entwined, and back it came upon the mind as events of childhood do—nothing in itself: perhaps a word, a laugh, a look, some slight distress, a passing thought or fear—and yet more strongly and distinctly marked, and better far remembered, than the hardest trials or severest sorrows of but a year ago.

One of these expeditions led them through the churchyard where was his father's grave. "Even here," said Nicholas, softly, "we used to loiter before we knew what death was, and when we little thought whose ashes would rest beneath, and wondering at the silence, sit down to rest and speak below our breath. Once Kate was lost, and after an hour of fruitless search, they found her fast asleep under that tree which shades my father's grave. He was very fond of her, and said when he took her up in his arms, still sleeping, that whenever he died he would wish to be buried where his dear little child had laid her head. You see his wish was not forgotten."

Nothing more passed at the time, but that night, as Nicholas sat beside his bed, Smike started up from what had

seemed to be a slumber, and laying his hand in his, prayed, as the tears coursed down his face, that he would make him one solemn promise.

"What is that?" said Nicholas, kindly. "If I can redeem it, or hope to do so, you know I will."

"I am sure you will," was the reply. "Promise me that when I die, I shall be buried near—as near as they can make my grave—to the tree we saw to-day."

Nicholas gave the promise; he had few words to give it in, but they were solemn and earnest. His poor friend kept his hand in his, and turned as if to sleep. But there were stifled sobs; and the hand was pressed more than once, or twice, or thrice, before he sank to rest, and slowly loosed his hold.

In a fortnight's time, he became too ill to move about. Once or twice Nicholas drove him out, propped up with pillows, but the motion of the chaise was painful to him, and brought on fits of fainting, which, in his weakened state, were dangerous. There was an old couch in the house which was his favourite resting-place by day; when the sun shone, and the weather was warm, Nicholas had this wheeled into a little orchard which was close at hand, and his charge being well wrapped up and carried out to it, they used to sit there sometimes for hours together.

It was on one of these occasions that a circumstance took place, which Nicholas at the time thoroughly believed to be the mere delusion of an imagination affected by disease, but which he had afterwards too good reason to know was of real and actual occurrence.

He had brought Smike out in his arms—poor fellow! a child might have carried him then—to see the sunset, and, having arranged his couch, had taken his seat beside it. He had been watching the whole of the night before, and being greatly fatigued both in mind and body, gradually fell asleep.

He could not have closed his eyes five minutes, when he was awakened by a scream, and starting up in that kind of terror which affects a person suddenly roused, saw to his great astonishment that his charge had struggled into a sitting posture, and with eyes almost starting from their sockets, the cold dew standing on his forehead, and in a fit of trembling which quite convulsed his frame, was shrieking to him for help.

"Good Heaven, what is this!" cried Nicholas, bending over him. "Be calm; you have been dreaming."

"No, no, no!" cried Smike, clinging to him. "Hold me tight. Don't let me go. There—there—behind the tree!"

Nicholas followed his eyes, which were directed to some distance behind the chair from which he himself had just risen. But there was nothing there.

"This is nothing but your fancy," he said, as he strove to compose him; "nothing else indeed."

"I know better. I saw as plain as I see now," was the answer. "Oh! say you'll keep me with you—swear you won't leave me for an instant!"

"Do I ever leave you?" returned Nicholas. "Lie down again now—there. You see I'm here. Now tell me—what was it?"

"Do you remember," said Smike, in a low voice, and glancing fearfully round, "do you remember my telling you of the man who first took me to the school?"

"Yes, surely."

"I raised my eyes just now towards that tree—that one with the thick trunk—and there, with his eyes fixed on me, he stood!"

"Only reflect for one moment," said Nicholas; "granting for an instant that it's likely he is alive and wandering about a lonely place like this, so far removed from the public road, do you think that at this distance of time you could possibly know that man again?"

"Anywhere—in any dress," returned Smike; "but just now, he stood leaning upon his stick and looking at me, exactly as I told you I remembered him. He was dusty with walking, and poorly dressed—I think his clothes were ragged—but directly I saw him, the wet night, his face when he left me, the parlour I was left in, and the people that were there, all seemed to come back together. When he knew I saw him, he looked frightened, for he started and shrank away. I have thought of him by day, and dreamt of him by night. He looked in my sleep when I was quite a little child, and has looked in my sleep ever since, as he did just now."

Nicholas endeavoured, by every persuasion and argument he could think of, to convince the terrified creature that his imagination had deceived him, and that this close resem-

blance between the creation of his dreams and the man he supposed he had seen was but a proof of it; but all in vain. When he could persuade him to remain for a few moments in the care of the people to whom the house belonged, he instituted a strict inquiry whether any stranger had been seen, and searched himself behind the tree, and through the orchard, and upon the land immediately adjoining, and in every place near, where it was possible for a man to lie concealed, but all in vain. Satisfied that he was right in his original conjecture, he ultimately applied himself to calming the fears of Smike, which after some time he partially succeeded in doing, though not in removing the impression upon his mind, for he still declared again and again in the most solemn and fervid manner, that he had positively seen what he described, and that nothing could ever remove his firm conviction of its reality.

And now Nicholas began to see that hope was gone, and that upon the partner of his poverty, and the sharer of his better fortune, the world was closing fast. There was little pain, little uneasiness, but there was no rallying, no effort, no struggle for life. He was worn and wasted to the last degree; his voice had sunk so low, that he could scarce be heard to speak. Nature was thoroughly exhausted, and he had lain him down to die.

On a fine, mild autumn day, when all was tranquil and at peace, when the soft sweet air crept in at the open window of the quiet room, and not a sound was heard but the gentle rustling of the leaves, Nicholas sat in his old place by the bedside, and knew that the time was nearly come. So very still it was, that every now and then he bent down his ear to listen for the breathing of him who lay asleep, as if to assure himself that life was still there, and that he had not fallen into that deep slumber from which on earth there is no waking.

While he was thus employed, the closed eyes opened, and on the pale face there came a placid smile.

"That's well," said Nicholas. "The sleep has done you good."

"I have had such pleasant dreams," was the answer. "Such pleasant, happy dreams!"

"Of what?" said Nicholas.

The dying boy turned towards him, and putting his arm about his neck, made answer, "I shall soon be there!"

After a short silence, he spoke again.

"I am not afraid to die," he said, "I am quite contented. I almost think that if I could rise from this bed quite well, I would not wish to do so now. You have so often told me we shall meet again—so very often lately, and now I feel the truth of that so strongly—that I can even bear to part from you."

The trembling voice and tearful eye, and the closer grasp of the arm which accompanied these latter words, showed how they filled the speaker's heart; nor were there wanting indications of how deeply they had touched the heart of him to whom they were addressed.

"You say well," returned Nicholas at length, "and comfort me very much, dear fellow. Let me hear you say you are happy, if you can."

"I must tell you something first. I should not have a secret from you. You would not blame me at a time like this, I know."

"*I* blame you!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"I am sure you would not. You asked me why I was so changed, and—and sat so much alone. Shall I tell you why?"

"Not if it pains you," said Nicholas. "I only asked that I might make you happier if I could."

"I know—I felt that at the time." He drew his friend closer to him. "You will forgive me; I could not help it, but though I would have died to make her happy, it broke my heart to see—I know he loves her dearly—Oh! who could find that out so soon as I!"

The words which followed were feebly and faintly uttered, and broken by long pauses; but from them Nicholas learnt, for the first time, that the dying boy, with all the ardour of a nature concentrated on one absorbing, hopeless, secret passion, loved his sister Kate.

He had procured a lock of her hair, which hung at his breast, folded in one or two slight ribands she had worn. He prayed that when he was dead, Nicholas would take it off, so that no eyes but his might see it, and that when he was laid in his coffin and about to be placed in the earth, he would hang it round his neck again, that it might rest with him in the grave.

Upon his knees Nicholas gave him this pledge, and promised again that he should rest in the spot he had

pointed out. They embraced, and kissed each other on the cheek.

"Now," he murmured, "I am happy."

He fell into a slight slumber, and waking, smiled as before; then spoke of beautiful gardens, which he said stretched out before him, and were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces; then whispered that it was Eden—and so died.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE PLOTS BEGIN TO FAIL, AND DOUBTS AND DANGERS TO DISTURB THE PLOTTER.

RALPH sat alone in the solitary room where he was accustomed to take his meals, and to sit of nights when no profitable occupation called him abroad; before him was an untasted breakfast, and near to where his fingers beat restlessly upon the table, lay his watch. It was long past the time at which, for many years, he had put it in his pocket and gone with measured steps down stairs to the business of the day, but he took as little heed of its monotonous warning, as of the meat and drink before him, and remained with his head resting on one hand, and his eyes fixed moodily on the ground.

This departure from his regular and constant habit in one so regular and unvarying in all that appertained to the daily pursuit of riches, would almost of itself have told that the usurer was not well. That he laboured under some mental or bodily indisposition, and that it was one of no slight kind so to affect a man like him, was sufficiently shown by his haggard face, jaded air, and hollow languid eyes, which he raised at last with a start and a hasty glance around him, as one who suddenly awakes from sleep, and cannot immediately recognise the place in which he finds himself.

"What is this," he said, "that hangs over me, and I cannot shake off? I have never pampered myself, and should not be ill. I have never moped, and pined, and yielded to fancies; but what *can* a man do without rest?"

He pressed his hand upon his forehead.

"Night after night comes and goes, and I have no rest. If I sleep, what rest is that which is disturbed by constant dreams of the same detested faces crowding round me—of the same detested people in every variety of action, mingling with all I say and do, and always to my defeat? Waking, what rest have I, constantly haunted by this heavy shadow of—I know not what, which is its worst character? I must have rest. One night's unbroken rest, and I should be a man again."

Pushing the table from him while he spoke, as though he loathed the sight of food, he encountered the watch; the hands of which were almost upon noon.

"This is strange!" he said, "noon, and Noggs not here! what drunken brawl keeps him away? I would give something now, something in money even after that dreadful loss, if he had stabbed a man in a tavern scuffle, or broken into a house, or picked a pocket, or done anything that would send him abroad with an iron ring upon his leg, and rid me of him. Better still if I could throw temptation in his way, and lure him on to rob me. He should be welcome to what he took, so I brought the law upon him; for he is a traitor, I swear! How, or when, or where I don't know, though I suspect."

After waiting for another half-hour, he despatched the woman who kept his house to Newman's lodging, to inquire if he were ill, and why he had not come or sent. She brought back answer that he had not been home all night, and that no one could tell her anything about him.

"But there is a gentleman, Sir," she said, "below, who was standing at the door when I came in, and he says——"

"What says he?" demanded Ralph, turning angrily upon her. "I told you I would see nobody."

"He says," replied the woman, abashed by his harshness, "that he comes on very particular business which admits of no excuse, and I thought perhaps it might be about——"

"About what, in the devil's name?" said Ralph hastily. "*You* spy and speculate on people's business with me, do you, woman?"

"Dear, no, Sir! I saw you were anxious, and thought it might be about Mr. Noggs; that's all."

"Saw I was anxious!" muttered Ralph; "they all watch

me now. Where is this person? You did not say I was not down yet, I hope?"

The woman replied that he was in the little office, and that she had said her master was engaged, but she would take the message.

"Well," said Ralph, "I'll see him. Go you to your kitchen, and keep there,—do you mind me?"

Glad to be released, the woman quickly disappeared. Collecting himself, and assuming as much of his accustomed manner as his utmost resolution could summon, Ralph descended the stairs, and after pausing for a few moments, with his hand upon the lock, entered Newman's room, and confronted Mr. Charles Cheeryble.

Of all men alive, this was one of the last he would have wished to meet at any time; but now that he recognised in him only the patron and protector of Nicholas, he would rather have seen a spectre. One beneficial effect, however, the encounter had upon him. It instantly roused all his dormant energies; rekindled in his breast the passions that for many years had found an improving home there; called up all his wrath, hatred, and malice; restored the sneer to his lip, and the scowl to his brow; and made him again in all outward appearance the same Ralph Nickleby that so many had bitter cause to remember.

"Humph!" said Ralph, pausing at the door. "This is an unexpected favour, Sir."

"And an unwelcome one," said brother Charles; "an unwelcome one, I know."

"Men say you are truth itself, Sir," sneered Ralph. "You speak truth now at all events, and I'll not contradict you. The favour is at least as unwelcome as it is unexpected. I can scarcely say more!"

"Plainly, Sir——" began brother Charles.

"Plainly, Sir," interrupted Ralph, "I wish this conference to be a short one, and to end where it begins. I guess the subject upon which you are about to speak, and I'll not hear you. You like plainness, I believe,—there it is. Here is the door as you see. Our way lies in very different directions. Take yours, I beg of you, and leave me to pursue mine in quiet."

"In quiet!" repeated brother Charles mildly, and looking at him with more of pity than reproach. "To pursue *his* way in quiet!"

"You will scarcely remain in my house, I presume, Sir, against my will," said Ralph; "or you can scarcely hope to make an impression upon a man who closes his ears to all that you can say, and is firmly and resolutely determined not to hear you."

"Mr. Nickleby, Sir," returned brother Charles, no less mildly than before, but firmly too, "I come here against my will—sorely and grievously against my will. I have never been in this house before; and to speak my mind, Sir, I don't feel at home or easy in it, and have no wish ever to be here again. You do not guess the subject on which I come to speak to you, you do not indeed. I am sure of that, or your manner would be a very different one."

Ralph glanced keenly at him, but the clear eye and open countenance of the honest old merchant underwent no change of expression, and met his look without reserve.

"Shall I go on?" said Mr. Cheeryble.

"Oh, by all means, if you please," returned Ralph drily. "Here are walls to speak to, Sir, a desk, and two stools —most attentive auditors, and certain not to interrupt you. Go on, I beg; make my house yours, and perhaps by the time I return from my walk, you will have finished what you have to say, and will yield me up possession again."

So saying, he buttoned his coat, and turning into the passage, took down his hat. The old gentleman followed, and was about to speak, when Ralph waved him off impatiently, and said:

"Not a word. I tell you, Sir, not a word. Virtuous as you are, you are not an angel yet, to appear in men's houses whether they will or no, and pour your speech into unwilling ears. Preach to the walls I tell you—not to me!"

"I am no angel, Heavens knows," returned brother Charles, shaking his head, "but an erring and imperfect man; nevertheless, there is one quality which all men have in common with the angels blessed opportunities of exercising if they will—mercy. It is an errand of mercy that brings me here. Pray, let me discharge it."

"I show no mercy," retorted Ralph with a triumphant smile, "and I ask none. Seek no mercy from me, Sir, in behalf of the fellow who has imposed upon your childish credulity, but let him expect the worst that I can do."

"He ask mercy at your hands!" exclaimed the old merchant warmly, "ask it at his, Sir, ask it at his. If you

will not hear me now when you may, hear me when you must, or anticipate what I would say, and take measures to prevent our ever meeting again. Your nephew is a noble lad, Sir, an honest, noble lad. What you are, Mr. Nickleby, I will not say; but what you have done, I know. Now, Sir, when you go about the business in which you have been recently engaged, and find it difficult of pursuing, come to me and my brother Ned, and Tim Linkinwater, Sir, and we'll explain it for you—and come soon, or it may be too late, and you may have it explained with a little more roughness, and a little less delicacy—and never forget, Sir, that I came here this morning in mercy to you, and am still ready to talk to you in the same spirit."

With these words, uttered with great emphasis and emotion, brother Charles put on his broad-brimmed hat, and, passing Ralph Nickleby without any further remark, trotted nimbly into the street. Ralph looked after him, but neither moved nor spoke for some time—when he broke what almost seemed the silence of stupefaction, by a scornful laugh.

"This," he said, "from its wildness, should be another of those dreams that have so broken my rest of late. In mercy to me—Pho! The old simpleton has gone mad."

Although he expressed himself in this derisive and contemptuous manner, it was plain that the more Ralph pondered, the more ill at ease he became, and the more he laboured under some vague anxiety and alarm, which increased as the time passed on and no tidings of Newman Noggs appeared. After waiting until late in the afternoon, tortured by various apprehensions and misgivings, and the recollection of the warning which his nephew had given him when they last met, the further confirmation of which now presented itself in one shape of probability, now in another, and haunted him perpetually, he left home, and scarcely knowing why, save that he was in a suspicious and agitated mood, betook himself to Snawley's house. His wife presented herself, and of her Ralph inquired whether her husband was at home.

"No," she said sharply, "he is not indeed, and I don't think he will be at home for a very long time, that's more."

"Do you know who I am?" asked Ralph.

"Oh yes, I know you very well—too well, perhaps, and

perhaps he does too, and sorry am I that I should have to say it."

"Tell him that I saw him through the window-blind above, as I crossed the road just now, and that I would speak to him on business," said Ralph sarcastically. "Do your hear?"

"I hear," rejoined Mrs. Snawley, taking no further notice of the request.

"I knew this woman was a hypocrite in the way of psalms and Scripture phrases," said Ralph, passing quietly by, "but I never knew she drank before."

"Stop! You don't come in here," said Mr. Snawley's better-half, interposing her person, which was a robust one, in the doorway. "You have said more than enough to him on business before now. I always told him what dealing with you and working out your schemes would come to. It was either you or the schoolmaster—one of you, or the two between you—that got the forged letter done, remember that! That wasn't his doing, so don't lay it at his door."

"Hold your tongue, you Jezebel," said Ralph, looking fearfully round.

"Ah, I know when to hold my tongue, and when to speak, Mr. Nickleby," retorted the dame. "Take care that other people know when to hold theirs."

"You jade," said Ralph, grinning with rage; "if your husband has been idiot enough to trust you with his secrets, keep them—keep them, she-devil that you are!"

"Not so much his secrets as other people's secrets perhaps," retorted the woman; "not so much his secrets as yours. None of your black looks at me! You'll want 'em all perhaps for another time. You had better keep 'em."

"Will you," said Ralph, suppressing his passion as well as he could, and clutching her tightly by the wrist; "will you go to your husband and tell him that I know he is at home, and that I must see him? And will you tell me what it is that you and he mean by this new style of behaviour?"

"No," replied the woman, violently disengaging herself, "I'll do neither."

"You set me at defiance, do you?" said Ralph.

"Yes," was the answer. "I do."

For an instant Ralph had his hand raised as though he were about to strike her, but checking himself, and nodding

his head, and muttering as though to assure her he would not forget this, walked away.

Thence, he went straight to the inn which Mr. Squeers frequented and inquired when he had been there last; in the vague hope that, whether successful or unsuccessful, he might by this time have returned from his mission and be able to assure him that all was safe. But Mr. Squeers had not been there for ten days, and all that the people could tell about him was, that he had left his luggage and his bill.

Disturbed by a thousand fears and surmises, and bent upon ascertaining whether Squeers had any suspicion of Snawley, or was in any way a party to this altered behaviour, Ralph determined to hazard the extreme step of inquiring for him at the Lambeth lodging, and having an interview with him even there. Bent upon this purpose, and in that mood in which delay is insupportable, he repaired at once to the place, and being by description perfectly acquainted with the situation of his room, crept up stairs and knocked gently at the door.

Not one, nor two, nor three, nor yet a dozen knocks served to convince Ralph against his wish that there was nobody inside. He reasoned that he might be asleep; and, listening, almost persuaded himself that he could hear him breathe. Even when he was satisfied that he could not be there, he sat patiently down upon a broken stair and waited; arguing that he had gone out upon some slight errand and must soon return.

Many feet came up the creaking stairs; and the step of some seemed to his listening ear so like that of the man for whom he waited, that Ralph often stood up to be ready to address him when he reached the top; but one by one each person turned off into some room short of the place where he was stationed: and at every such disappointment he felt quite chilled and lonely.

At length he felt it was hopeless to remain, and going down stairs again, inquired of one of the lodgers if he knew anything of Mr. Squeers's movements—mentioning that worthy by an assumed name which had been agreed upon between them. By this lodger he was referred to another, and by him to some one else, from whom he learnt that late on the previous night he had gone out hastily with two men, who had shortly afterwards returned for the old woman who lived on the same floor; and that although the

circumstance had attracted the attention of the informant, he had not spoken to them at the time, nor made any inquiry afterwards.

This possessed him with the idea that perhaps Peg Sliderskew had been apprehended for the robbery, and that Mr. Squeers being with her at the time, had been apprehended also on suspicion of being a confederate. If this were so, the fact must be known to Gride; and to Gride's house he directed his steps; now thoroughly alarmed, and fearful that there were indeed plots afoot tending to his discomfiture and ruin.

Arrived at the usurer's house, he found the windows close shut, the dingy blinds drawn down: all silent, melancholy, and deserted. But this was its usual aspect. He knocked—gently at first—then loud and vigorously, but nobody came. He wrote a few words in pencil on a card, and having thrust it under the door was going away when a noise above as though a window-sash were stealthily raised caught his ear, and looking up he could just discern the face of Gride himself cautiously peering over the house parapet from the window of the garret. Seeing who was below, he drew it in again; not so quickly however but that Ralph let him know he was observed, and called to him to come down.

The call being repeated, Gride looked out again so cautiously that no part of the old man's body was visible, and the sharp features and white hair appearing alone above the parapet looked like a severed head garnishing the wall.

"Hush!" he cried. "Go away—go away!"

"Come down," said Ralph, beckoning him.

"Go a—way!" squeaked Gride, shaking his head in a sort of ecstacy of impatience. "Don't speak to me, don't knock, don't call attention to the house, but go away."

"I'll knock I swear till I have your neighbours up in arms," said Ralph, "if you don't tell me what you mean by lurking there, you whining cur."

"I can't hear what you say—don't talk to me, it isn't safe—go away—go away!" returned Gride.

"Come down, I say. Will you come down!" said Ralph fiercely.

"No—o—o—o," snarled Gride. He drew in his head; and Ralph, left standing in the street, could hear the sash closed as gently and carefully as it had been opened.

"How is this," said he, "that they all fall from me and shun me like the plague—these men who have licked the dust from my feet! *Is* my day past, and is this indeed the coming on of night? I'll know what it means, I will, at any cost. I am firmer and more myself just now than I have been these many days."

Turning from the door, which in the first transport of his rage he had meditated battering upon until Gride's very fears impelled him to open it, he turned his face towards the City, and working his way steadily through the crowd which was pouring from it (it was by this time between five and six o'clock in the afternoon) went straight to the house of business of the Brothers Cheeryble, and putting his head into the glass case, found Tim Linkinwater alone.

"My name's Nickleby," said Ralph.

"I know it," replied Tim, surveying him through his spectacles.

"Which of your firm was it who called on me this morning?" demanded Ralph.

"Mr. Charles."

"Then tell Mr. Charles I want to see him."

"You shall see," said Tim, getting off his stool with great agility, "you shall see, not only Mr. Charles, but Mr. Ned likewise."

Tim stopped, looked steadily and severely at Ralph, nodded his head once in a curt manner which seemed to say there was a little more behind, and vanished. After a short interval he returned, and ushering Ralph into the presence of the two brothers, remained in the room himself.

"I want to speak to you, who spoke to me this morning," said Ralph, pointing out with his finger the man whom he addressed.

"I have no secrets from my brother Ned, or from Tim Linkinwater," observed brother Charles quietly.

"I have," said Ralph.

"Mr. Nickleby, Sir," said brother Ned, "the matter upon which my brother Charles called upon you this morning is one which is already perfectly well known to us three and to others besides, and must unhappily soon become known to a great many more. He waited upon you, Sir, this morning alone, as a matter of delicacy and consideration. We feel now that further delicacy and considera-

tion would be misplaced, and if we confer together it must be as we are or not at all."

"Well, gentlemen," said Ralph, with a curl of the lip, "talking in riddles would seem to be the peculiar forte of you two, and I suppose your clerk, like a prudent man, has studied the art also with a view to your good graces. Talk in company, gentlemen, in God's name. I'll humour you."

"Humour!" cried Tim Linkinwater, suddenly growing very red in the face, "He'll humour us! He'll humour Cheeryble Brothers! Do you hear that? Do you hear him? *Do* you hear him say he'll humour Cheeryble Brothers?"

"Tim," said Charles and Ned together, "pray Tim, pray now, don't."

Tim, taking the hint, stifled his indignation as well as he could and suffered it to escape through his spectacles, with the additional safety-valve of a short hysterical laugh now and then, which seemed to relieve him mightily.

"As nobody bids me to a seat," said Ralph looking round, "I'll take one, for I am fatigued with walking. And now if you please, gentlemen, I wish to know—I demand to know; I have the right—what you have to say to me which justifies such a tone as you have assumed, and that underhand interference in my affairs which I have reason to suppose you have been practising. I tell you plainly, gentlemen, that little as I care for the opinion of the world (as the slang goes) I don't choose to submit quietly to slander and malice. Whether you suffer yourselves to be imposed upon too easily, or wilfully make yourselves parties to it, the result to me is the same, and in either case you can't expect from a plain man like myself much consideration or forbearance."

So coolly and deliberately was this said, that nine men out of ten, ignorant of the circumstances, would have supposed Ralph to be really an injured man. There he sat with folded arms; paler than usual certainly and sufficiently ill-favoured, but quite collected—far more so than the brothers or the exasperated Tim—and ready to face out the very worst.

"Very well, Sir," said brother Charles. "Very well. Brother Ned, will you ring the bell?"

"Charles, my dear fellow! stop one instant," returned the other. "It will be better for Mr. Nickleby and for our object, that he should remain silent if he can, till we

have said what we have to say. I wish him to understand that."

"Quite right, quite right," said brother Charles.

Ralph smiled, but made no reply. The bell was rung; the room-door opened; a man came in with a halting walk; and, looking round, Ralph's eyes met those of Newman Noggs. From that moment his heart began to fail him.

"This is a good beginning," he said bitterly. "Oh! this is a good beginning. You are candid, honest, open-hearted, fair-dealing men! I always knew the real worth of such characters as yours! To tamper with a fellow like this, who would sell his soul (if he had one) for drink, and whose every word is a lie! What men are safe if this is done? Oh it's a good beginning!"

"I *will* speak," cried Newman, standing on tiptoe to look over Tim's head, who had interposed to prevent him. "Hallo, you Sir—old Nickleby—what do you mean when you talk of 'a fellow like this?' Who made me 'a fellow like this?' If I would sell my soul for drink, why wasn't I a thief, swindler, housebreaker, area sneak, robber of pence out of the trays of blind men's dogs, rather than your drudge and packhorse? If my every word was a lie, why wasn't I a pet and favourite of yours? Lie! When did I ever cringe and fawn to you—eh? Tell me that! I served you faithfully. I did more work because I was poor, and took more hard words from you because I despised you and them, than any man you could have got from the parish workhouse. I did. I served you because I was proud; because I was a lonely man with you, and there were no other drudges to see my degradation; and because nobody knew better than you that I was a ruined man, that I hadn't always been what I am, and that I might have been better off if I hadn't been a fool and fallen into the hands of you and others who were knaves. Do you deny that—eh?"

"Gently," reasoned Tim, "you said you wouldn't."

"I said I wouldn't!" cried Newman, thrusting him aside, and moving his hand as Tim moved, so as to keep him at arm's-length. "Don't tell me! Here, you Nickleby! Don't pretend not to mind me; it won't do; I know better. You were talking of tampering just now. Who tampered with Yorkshire schoolmasters, and, while they sent the drudge out that he shouldn't overhear, forgot that

such great caution might render him suspicious, and that he might watch his master out at nights, and might set other eyes to watch the schoolmaster besides? Who tampered with a selfish father, urging him to sell his daughter to old Arthur Gride, and tampered with Gride too, and did so in the little office *with a closet in the room?*"

Ralph had put a great command upon himself, but he could not have suppressed a slight start, if he had been certain to be beheaded for it next moment.

"Aha!" cried Newman. "You mind me now, do you? What first set this fag to be jealous of his master's actions, and to feel that if he hadn't crossed him when he might, he would have been as bad as he, or worse? That master's cruel treatment of his own flesh and blood, and vile designs upon a young girl who interested even his broken-down, drunken, miserable hack, and made him linger in his service, in the hope of doing her some good (as, thank God, he had done others once or twice before), when he would otherwise have relieved his feelings by pummelling his master soundly, and then going to the Devil. He would—mark that; and mark this—that I'm here now, because these gentlemen thought it best. When I sought them out (as I did—there was no tampering with me) I told them I wanted help to find you out, to trace you down, to go through with what I had begun, to help the right; and that when I had done it, I'd burst into your room and tell you all, face to face, man to man, and like a man. Now I've said my say, and let anybody else say theirs, and fire away!"

With this concluding sentiment, Newman Noggs, who had been perpetually sitting down and getting up again all through his speech which he had delivered in a series of jerks, and who was, from the violent exercise and the excitement combined, in a state of most intense and fiery heat, became, without passing through any intermediate stage, stiff, upright, and motionless, and so remained, staring at Ralph Nickleby with all his might and main.

Ralph looked at him for an instant, and for an instant only; then waved his hand, and, beating the ground with his foot, said in a choking voice:

"Go on, gentlemen, go on! I'm patient, you see. There's law to be had, there's law. I shall call you to an account for this. Take care what you say; I shall make you prove it."

"The proof is ready," returned brother Charles, "quite ready to our hands. The man Snawley last night made a confession."

"Who may 'the man Snawley' be," returned Ralph, "and what may his 'confession' have to do with my affairs?"

To this inquiry, put with a dogged inflexibility of manner which language cannot express, the old gentleman returned no answer, but went on to say that to show him how much they were in earnest, it would be necessary to tell him not only what accusations were made against him, but what proof of them they had, and how that proof had been acquired. This laying open the whole question, brought up brother Ned, Tim Linkinwater, and Newman Noggs, all three at once, who, after a vast deal of talking together, and a scene of great confusion, laid before Ralph in distinct terms the following statement.

That Newman, having been solemnly assured by one not then producible that Smike was not the son of Snawley, and this person having offered to make oath to that effect if necessary, they had by this communication been first led to doubt the claim set up, which they would otherwise have seen no reason to dispute, supported as it was by evidence which they had no power of disproving. That once suspecting the existence of a conspiracy, they had no difficulty in tracing back its origin to the malice of Ralph and the vindictiveness and avarice of Squeers. That suspicion and proof being two very different things, they had been advised by a lawyer, eminent for his sagacity and acuteness in such practice, to resist the proceedings taken on the other side for the recovery of the youth as slowly and artfully as possible, and meanwhile to beset Snawley (with whom it was clear the main falsehood must rest); to lead him, if possible, into contradictory and conflicting statements; to harass him by all available means; and so to practise on his fears and regard for his own safety as to induce him to divulge the whole scheme, and to give up his employer and whomsoever else he could implicate. That all this had been skilfully done; but that Snawley, who was well practised in the arts of low cunning and intrigue, had successfully baffled all their attempts, until an unexpected circumstance had brought him last night upon his knees.

It thus arose. When Newman Noggs reported that Squeers was again in town, and that an interview of such secrecy had taken place between him and Ralph that he had been sent out of the house, plainly lest he should overhear a word, a watch was set upon the schoolmaster, in the hope that something might be discovered which would throw some light upon the suspected plot. It being found, however, that he held no further communication with Ralph nor any with Snawley, and lived quite alone, they were completely at fault; the watch was withdrawn, and they would have observed his motions no longer, if it had not happened that one night Newman stumbled unobserved upon him and Ralph in the street together. Following them, he discovered, to his great surprise, that they repaired to various low lodging-houses, and taverns kept by broken gamblers, to more than one of whom Ralph was known, and were in pursuit—so he found by inquiries when they had left—of an old woman, whose description exactly tallied with that of deaf Mrs. Sliderskew. Affairs now appearing to assume a more serious complexion, the watch was renewed with increased vigilance; an officer was procured who took up his abode in the same tavern with Squeers; and by him and Frank Cheeryble the footsteps of the unconscious schoolmaster were dogged, until he was safely housed in the lodging at Lambeth. Mr. Squeers having shifted his lodging, the officer shifted his, and, lying concealed in the same street, and, indeed, in the opposite house, soon found that Mr. Squeers and Mrs. Sliderskew were in constant communication.

In this state of things Arthur Gride was appealed to. The robbery, partly owing to the inquisitiveness of the neighbours, and partly to his own grief and rage, had long ago become known; but he positively refused to give his sanction or yield any assistance to the old woman's capture, and was seized with such a panic at the idea of being called upon to give evidence against her, that he shut himself up close in his house, and refused to hold communication with anybody. Upon this, the pursuers took counsel together, and, coming so near the truth as to arrive at the conclusion that Gride and Ralph, with Squeers for their instrument, were negotiating for the recovery of some of the stolen papers which would not bear the light, and might possibly explain the hints relative to Madeline which Newman had

overheard, resolved that Mrs. Sliderskew should be taken into custody before she had parted with them, and Squeers too, if anything suspicious could be attached to him. Accordingly, a search-warrant being procured, and all prepared, Mr. Squeers's window was watched, until his light was put out, and the time arrived when, as had been previously ascertained, he usually visited Mrs. Sliderskew. This done, Frank Cheeryble and Newman stole up stairs to listen to their discourse, and to give the signal to the officer at the most favourable time. At what an opportune moment they arrived, how they listened, and what they heard, is already known to the reader. Mr. Squeers, still half stunned, was hurried off with a stolen deed in his possession, and Mrs. Sliderskew was apprehended likewise. The information being promptly carried to Snawley that Squeers was in custody—he was not told for what—that worthy, first extorting a promise that he should be kept harmless, declared the whole tale concerning Smike to be a fiction and forgery, and implicated Ralph Nickleby to the fullest extent. As to Mr. Squeers, he had that morning undergone a private examination before a magistrate, and being unable to account satisfactorily for his possession of the deed or his companionship with Mrs. Sliderskew, had been, with her, remanded for a week.

All these discoveries were now related to Ralph circumstantially and in detail. Whatever impression they secretly produced, he suffered no sign of emotion to escape him, but sat perfectly still, not raising his frowning eyes from the ground, and covering his mouth with his hand. When the narrative was concluded, he raised his head hastily, as if about to speak, but on brother Charles resuming, fell into his old attitude again.

"I told you this morning," said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his brother's shoulder, "that I came to you in mercy. How far you may be implicated in this last transaction, or how far the person who is now in custody may criminate you, you best know. But justice must take its course against the parties implicated in the plot against this poor, unoffending, injured lad. It is not in my power, or in the power of my brother Ned, to save you from the consequences. The utmost we can do is to warn you in time, and to give you an opportunity of escaping them. We would not have an old man like you disgraced and pun-

ished by your near relation, nor would we have him forget, like you, all ties of blood and nature. We entreat you—brother Ned, you join me, I know, in this entreaty, and so Tim Linkinwater do you, although you pretend to be an obstinate dog, Sir, and sit there frowning as if you didn't—we entreat you to retire from London, to take shelter in some place where you will be safe from the consequences of these wicked designs, and where you may have time, Sir, to atone for them, and to become a better man."

"And do you think," returned Ralph, rising, with the sneer of a devil, "and do you think you will so easily crush *me?* Do you think that a hundred well-arranged plans, or a hundred suborned witnesses, or a hundred false curs at my heels, or a hundred canting speeches full of oily words, will move me? I thank you for disclosing your schemes, which I am now prepared for. You have not the man to deal with that you think; try me, and remember that I spit upon your fair words and false dealings, and dare you—provoke you—taunt you—to do to me the very worst you can!"

Thus they parted for that time; but the worst had not come yet.

CHAPTER LX.

THE DANGERS THICKEN, AND THE WORST IS TOLD.

Instead of going home, Ralph threw himself into the first street cabriolet he could find, and directing the driver towards the police-office of the district in which Mr. Squeers's misfortunes had occurred, alighted at a short distance from it, and, discharging the man, went the rest of his way thither on foot. Inquiring for the object of his solicitude, he learnt that he had timed his visit well, for Mr. Squeers was in fact at that moment waiting for a hackney-coach he had ordered, and in which he purposed proceeding to his week's retirement, like a gentleman.

Demanding speech with the prisoner, he was ushered into a kind of waiting-room in which, by reason of his scholastic profession and superior respectability, Mr. Squeers had been permitted to pass the day. Here, by the light of a guttering and blackened candle, he could barely discern

the schoolmaster fast asleep on a bench in a remote corner. An empty glass stood on a table before him, and this, with his somnolent condition and a very strong smell of brandy and water, forewarned the visitor that Mr. Squeers had been seeking in creature comforts a temporary forgetfulness of his unpleasant situation.

It was not a very easy matter to rouse him: so lethargic and heavy were his slumbers. Regaining his faculties by slow and faint glimmerings, he at length sat upright, and displaying a very yellow face, a very red nose, and a very bristly beard, the joint effect of which was considerably heightened by a dirty white handkerchief, spotted with blood, drawn over the crown of his head and tied under his chin, stared ruefully at Ralph in silence, until his feelings found a vent in this pithy sentence:

"I say, young fellow, you've been and done it now, you have!"

"What's the matter with your head?" asked Ralph.

"Why, your man, your informing kidnapping man, has been and broke it," rejoined Squeers sulkily, "that's what's the matter with it. You've come at last, have you?"

"Why have you not sent to me?" said Ralph. "How could I come till I knew what had befallen you?"

"My family!" hiccupped Mr. Squeers, raising his eye to the ceiling; "my daughter as is at that age when all the sensibilities is a coming out strong in blow—my son as is the young Norval of private life, and the pride and ornament of a doting willage—here's a shock for the family! The coat of arms of the Squeerses is tore, and their sun is gone down into the ocean wave!"

"You have been drinking," said Ralph, "and have not yet slept yourself sober."

"I haven't been drinking your health, my codger," replied Mr. Squeers, "so you have nothing to do with that."

Ralph suppressed the indignation which the schoolmaster's altered and insolent manner awakened, and asked again why he had not sent to him.

"What should I get by sending to you?" returned Squeers. "To be known to be in with you, wouldn't do me a great deal of good, and they won't take bail till they know something more of the case, so here am I hard and fast, and there are you loose and comfortable."

"And so must you be in a few days," retorted Ralph,

with affected good-humour. "They can't hurt you, man."

"Why, I suppose they can't do much to me if I explain how it was that I got into the good company of that there ca-daverous old Slider," replied Squeers viciously, "who I wish was dead and buried, and resurrected and dissected, and hung upon wires in a anatomical museum, before ever I'd had anything to do with her. This is what him with the powdered head says this morning, in so many words—'Prisoner! As you have been found in company with this woman; as you were detected in possession of this document; and as you were engaged with her in fraudulently destroying others, and can give no satisfactory account of yourself; I shall remand you for a week, in order that inquiries may be made, and evidence got. And meanwhile I can't take any bail for your appearance.' Well then, what I say now is, that I *can* give a satisfactory account of myself; I can hand in the card of my establishment and say, '*I* am the Wackford Squeers as is therein named, Sir. I am the man as is guaranteed by unimpeachable references to be a out-and-outer in morals and uprightness of principle. Whatever is wrong in this business is no fault of mine. I had no evil design in it, Sir. I was not aware that anything was wrong. I was merely employed by a friend—my friend Mr. Ralph Nickleby, of Golden Square. Send for him, Sir, and ask him what he has to say; he's the man; not me!'"

"What document was it that you had?" asked Ralph, evading for the moment the point just raised.

"What document? Why, *the* document," replied Squeers. "The Madeline what's-her-name one. It was a will, that's what it was."

"Of what nature, whose will, when dated, how benefiting her, to what extent?" aked Ralph hurriedly.

"A will in her favour, that's all I know," rejoined Squeers; "and that's more than you'd have known, if you'd had them bellows on your head. It's all owing to your precious caution that they got hold of it. If you had let me burn it, and taken my word that it was gone, it would have been a heap of ashes behind the fire, instead of being whole and sound inside of my great-coat."

"Beaten at every point!" muttered Ralph, gnawing his fingers.

"Ah!" sighed Squeers, who, between the brandy and water and his broken head, wandered strangely, "at the delightful village of Dotheboys near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocket-money, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry—this is a altered state of trigonomics, this is—a double l—all, everything—a cobbler's weapon. U-p—up, adjective, not down. S-q-u-double e-r-s—Squeers, noun substantive, a educator of youth. Total, all up with Squeers!"

His running on in this way had afforded Ralph an opportunity of recovering his presence of mind, which at once suggested to him the necessity of removing as far as possible the schoolmaster's misgivings, and leading him to believe that his safety and best policy lay in the preservation of a rigid silence.

"I tell you once again," he said, "they can't hurt you. You shall have an action for false imprisonment, and make a profit of this yet. We will devise a story for you that should carry you through twenty times such a trivial scrape as this; and if they want security in a thousand pounds for your reappearance in case you should be called upon, you shall have it. All you have to do is to keep back the truth. You're a little fuddled to-night, and may not be able to see this as clearly as you would at another time, but this is what you must do, and you'll need all your senses about you, for a slip might be awkward."

"Oh!" said Squeers, who had looked cunningly at him, with his head stuck on one side like an old raven. "That's what I'm to do, is it? Now then, just you hear a word or two from me. I an't a going to have any stories made for me, and I an't a going to stick to any. If I find matters going against me, I shall expect you to take your share, and I'll take care you do. You never said anything about danger. I never bargained for being brought into such a plight as this, and I don't mean to take it as quiet as you think. I let you lead me on from one thing to another, because we had been mixed up together in a certain sort of a way, and if you had liked to be ill-natured you might perhaps have hurt the business, and if you liked to be good-natured you might throw a good deal in my way. Well; if all goes right now, that's quite correct, and I

don't mind it; but if anything goes wrong, then times are altered, and I shall just say and do whatever I think may serve me most, and take advice from nobody. My moral influence with them lads," added Mr. Squeers, with deeper gravity, "is a tottering to its basis. The images of Mrs. Squeers, my daughter, and my son Wackford, all short of vittles, is perpetually before me; every other consideration melts away and vanishes in front of these; and the only number in all arithmetic that I know of as a husband and a father is number one, under this here most fatal go!"

How long Mr. Squeers might have declaimed, or how stormy a discussion his declamation might have led to, nobody knows. Being interrupted at this point by the arrival of the coach and an attendant who was to bear him company, he perched his hat with great dignity on the top of the handkerchief that bound his head, and thrusting one hand in his pocket, and taking the attendant's arm with the other, suffered himself to be led forth.

"As I supposed from his not sending!" thought Ralph. "This fellow, I plainly see through all his tipsy fooling, has made up his mind to turn upon me. I am so beset and hemmed in that they are not only struck with fear, but, like the beasts in the fable, have their fling at me now, though time was, and no longer ago than yesterday too, when they were all civility and compliance. But they shall not move me. I'll not give way. I will not budge one inch!"

He went home, and was glad to find the housekeeper complaining of illness that he might have an excuse for being alone and sending her away to where she lived, which was hard by. Then he sat down by the light of a single candle, and began to think, for the first time, on all that had taken place that day.

He had neither eaten nor drunk since last night, and in addition to the anxiety of mind he had undergone, had been travelling about from place to place almost incessantly for many hours. He felt sick and exhausted, but could taste nothing save a glass of water, and continued to sit with his head upon his hand—not resting or thinking, but laboriously trying to do both, and feeling that every sense, but one of weariness and desolation, was for the time benumbed.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he heard a knocking at the door, and still sat quiet as before, as if he could not even bring his thoughts to bear upon that. It had been often repeated, and he had several times heard a voice outside, saying there was a light in the window (meaning, as he knew, his own candle), before he could rouse himself and go down stairs.

"Mr. Nickleby, there is terrible news for you, and I am sent to beg you will come with me directly," said a voice he seemed to recognise. He held his hand above his eyes, and, looking out, saw Tim Linkinwater on the steps.

"Come where?" demanded Ralph.

"To our house—where you came this morning. I have a coach here."

"Why should I go there?" said Ralph.

"Don't ask me why, but pray come with me."

"Another edition of to-day!" returned Ralph, making as though he would shut the door.

"No, no!" cried Tim, catching him by the arm and speaking most earnestly; "it is only that you may hear something that has occurred—something very dreadful, Mr. Nickleby, which concerns you nearly. Do you think I would tell you so, or come to you like this, if it were not the case?"

Ralph looked at him more closely, and seeing that he was indeed greatly excited, faltered, and could not tell what to say or think.

"You had better hear this now than at any other time," said Tim, "it may have some influence with you. For Heaven's sake come!"

Perhaps at another time Ralph's obstinacy and dislike would have been proof against any appeal from such a quarter, however emphatically urged, but now, after a moment's hesitation, he went into the hall for his hat, and returning got into the coach without speaking a word.

Tim well remembered afterwards, and often said, that as Ralph Nickleby went into the house for this purpose, he saw him, by the light of the candle which he had set down upon a chair, reel and stagger like a drunken man. He well remembered too that when he had placed his foot upon the coach-steps, he turned round and looked upon him with a face so ashy pale and so very wild and vacant that it made him shudder, and for the moment almost afraid to

follow. People were fond of saying that he had some dark presentiment upon him then, but his emotion might perhaps, with greater show of reason, be referred to what he had undergone that day.

A profound silence was observed during the ride. Arrived at their place of destination, Ralph followed his conductor into the house, and into a room where the two brothers were. He was so astounded, not to say awed, by something of a mute compassion for himself which was visible in their manner and in that of the old clerk, that he could scarcely speak.

Having taken a seat, however, he contrived to say, though in broken words, "What—what have you to say to me—more than has been said already?"

The room was old and large, very imperfectly lighted, and terminated in a bay window, about which hung some heavy drapery. Casting his eyes in this direction, as he spoke, he thought he made out the dusky figure of a man, and he was confirmed in this impression by seeing that the object moved as if uneasy under his scrutiny.

"Who's that yonder?" he said.

"One who has conveyed to us within these two hours the intelligence which caused our sending to you," replied brother Charles. "Let him be, Sir, let him be for the present."

"More riddles!" said Ralph, faintly. "Well, Sir?"

In turning his face towards the brothers he was obliged to avert it from the window, but before either of them could speak, he had looked round again. It was evident that he was rendered restless and uncomfortable by the presence of the unseen person, for he repeated this action several times, and at length, as if in a nervous state which rendered him positively unable to turn away from the place, sat so as to have it opposite him, and muttered as an excuse that he could not bear the light.

The brothers conferred apart for a short time: their manner showing that they were agitated. Ralph glanced at them twice or thrice, and ultimately said, with a great effort to recover his self-possession, "Now, what is this? If I am brought from home at this time of night, let it be for something. What have you got to tell me?" After a short pause, he added, "Is my niece dead?"

He had struck upon a key which rendered the task of

commencement an easier one. Brother Charles turned, and said that it was death of which they had to tell him, but that his niece was well.

"You don't mean to tell me," said Ralph, as his eyes brightened, "that her brother's dead. No, that's too good. I'd not believe it if you told me so. It would be too welcome news to be true."

"Shame on you, you hardened and unnatural man," cried the other brother, warmly; "prepare yourself for intelligence, which, if you have any human feeling in your breast, will make even you shrink and tremble. What if we tell you that a poor unfortunate boy, a child in everything but never having known one of those tender endearments, or one of those lightsome hours which make our childhood a time to be remembered like a happy dream through all our after life—a warm-hearted, harmless, affectionate creature, who never offended you or did you wrong, but on whom you have vented the malice and hatred you have conceived for your nephew, and whom you have made an instrument for wreaking your bad passions upon him—what if we tell you that, sinking under your persecution, Sir, and the misery and ill-usage of a life short in years but long in suffering, this poor creature has gone to tell his sad tale where, for your part in it, you must surely answer?"

"If you tell me," said Ralph, eagerly; "if you tell me that he is dead, I forgive you all else. If you tell me that he is dead, I am in your debt and bound to you for life. He is! I see it in your faces. Who triumphs now? Is this your dreadful news, this your terrible intelligence? You see how it moves me. You did well to send. I would have travelled a hundred miles a-foot, through mud, mire, and darkness, to hear this news just at this time."

Even then, moved as he was by this savage joy, Ralph could see in the faces of the two brothers, mingling with their look of disgust and horror, something of that indefinable compassion for himself which he had noticed before.

"And *he* brought you the intelligence, did he?" said Ralph, pointing with his finger towards the recess already mentioned; "and sat there, no doubt, to see me prostrated and overwhelmed by it! Ha, ha, ha! But I tell him that I'll be a sharp thorn in his side for many a long day to come, and I tell you two again, that you don't know him

yet, and that you'll rue the day you took compassion on the vagabond."

"You take me for your nephew," said a hollow, dejected voice; "it would be better for you and for me too if I were he indeed."

The figure that he had seen so dimly, rose, and came slowly down. He started back, for he found that he confronted—not Nicholas, as he had supposed, but Brooker.

Ralph had no reason that he knew, to fear this man; he had never feared him before; but the pallor which had been observed in his face when he issued forth that night, came upon him again; he was seen to tremble, and his voice changed as he said, keeping his eyes upon him,

"What does this fellow here? Do you know he is a convict—a felon—a common thief!"

"Hear what he has to tell you—oh, Mr. Nickleby, hear what he has to tell you, be he what he may!" cried the brothers, with such emphatic earnestness, that Ralph turned to them in wonder. They pointed to Brooker, and Ralph again gazed at him: as it seemed mechanically.

"That boy," said the man, "that these gentlemen have been talking of—"

"That boy," repeated Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

"Whom I saw stretched dead and cold upon his bed, and who is now in his grave——"

"Who is now in his grave," echoed Ralph, like one who talks in his sleep.

The man raised his eyes, and clasped his hands solemnly together:

"——Was your only son, so help me God in heaven!"

In the midst of a dead silence, Ralph sat down, pressing his two hands upon his temples. He removed them after a minute, and never was there seen, part of a living man undisfigured by any wound, such a ghastly face as he then disclosed. He looked fixedly at Brooker, who was by this time standing at a short distance from him, but did not say one word or make the slightest sound or gesture.

"Gentlemen," said the man, "I offer no excuses for myself. I am long past that. If in telling you how this has happened, I tell you that I was harshly used and perhaps driven out of my real nature, I do it only as a necessary part of my story, and not to shield myself; I am a guilty man."

He stopped as if to recollect, and looking away from Ralph and addressing himself to the brothers, proceeded in a subdued and humble tone:

"Among those who once had dealings with this man, gentlemen—that's from twenty to five-and-twenty years ago—there was one, a rough, fox-hunting, hard-drinking gentleman, who had run through his own fortune, and wanted to squander away that of his sister; they were both orphans, and she lived with him and managed his house. I don't know whether it was originally to back his influence and try to over-persuade the young woman or not, but he," pointing to Ralph, "used to go down to the house in Leicestershire pretty often, and stop there many days at a time. They had a great many dealings together, and he may have gone on some of those, or to patch up his client's affairs, which were in a ruinous state—of course he went for profit. The gentlewoman was not a girl, but she was, I have heard say, handsome, and entitled to a pretty large property. In course of time he married her. The same love of gain which led him to contract this marriage, led to its being kept strictly private, for a clause in her father's will declared that if she married without her brother's consent, the property, in which she had only some life-interest while she remained single, should pass away altogether to another branch of the family. The brother would give no consent that the sister didn't buy and pay for handsomely; Mr. Nickleby would consent to no such sacrifice, and so they went on keeping their marriage secret, and waiting for him to break his neck or die of a fever. He did neither, and meanwhile the result of this private marriage was a son. The child was put out to nurse a long way off; his mother never saw him but once or twice and then by stealth; and his father—so eagerly did he thirst after the money which seemed to come almost within his grasp now, for his brother-in-law was very ill, and breaking more and more every day—never went near him, to avoid raising any suspicion. The brother lingered on; Mr. Nickleby's wife constantly urged him to avow their marriage; he peremptorily refused. She remained alone in a dull country house, seeing little or no company but riotous, drunken sportsmen. He lived in London and clung to his business. Angry quarrels and recriminations took place, and when they had been married nearly seven years, and were within a few weeks of the

time when the brother's death would have adjusted all, she eloped with a younger man and left him."

Here he paused, but Ralph did not stir, and the brothers signed to him to proceed.

"It was then that I became acquainted with these circumstances from his own lips. They were no secrets then; for the brother and others knew them; but they were communicated to me, not on this account, but because I was wanted. He followed the fugitives—some said to make money of his wife's shame, but I believe to take some violent revenge, for that was as much his character as the other—perhaps more. He didn't find them, and she died not long after. I don't know whether he began to think he might like the child, or whether he wished to make sure that it should never fall into its mother's hands; but before he went, he entrusted me with the charge of bringing it home. And I did so."

He went on, from this point, in a still more humble tone, and spoke in a very low voice, pointing to Ralph as he resumed.

"He had used me ill—cruelly—I reminded him in what, not long ago when I met him in the street—and I hated him. I brought the child home to his own house and lodged him in the front garret. Neglect had made him very sickly, and I was obliged to call in a doctor, who said he must be removed for change of air, or he would die. I think that first put it in my head. I did it then. He was gone six weeks, and when he came back, I told him—with every circumstance well planned and proved; nobody could have suspected me—that the child was dead and buried. He might have been disappointed in some intention he had formed, or he might have had some natural affection, but he *was* grieved at *that*, and I was confirmed in my design of opening up the secret one day, and making it a means of getting money from him. I had heard, like most other men, of Yorkshire schools. I took the child to one kept by a man named Squeers, and left it there. I gave him the name of Smike. I paid twenty pounds a-year for him for six years, never breathing the secret all the time, for I had left his father's service after more hard usage, and quarrelled with him again. I was sent away from this country. I have been away nearly eight years. Directly I came home again I travelled down into Yorkshire, and, skulking

in the village of an evening time, made inquiries about the boys at the school, and found that this one, whom I had placed there, had run away with a young man bearing the name of his own father. I sought his father out in London, and hinting at what I could tell him, tried for a little money to support life, but he repulsed me with threats. I then found out his clerk, and, going on from little to little, and showing him that there were good reasons for communicating with me, learnt what was going on; and it was I who told him that the boy was no son of the man who claimed to be his father. All this time I had never seen the boy. At length I heard from this same source that he was very ill, and where he was. I travelled down there that I might recall myself, if possible, to his recollection and confirm my story. I came upon him unexpectedly; but before I could speak he knew me—he had good cause to remember me, poor lad—and I would have sworn to him if I had met him in the Indies; I knew the piteous face I had seen in the little child. After a few days' indecision, I applied to the young gentleman in whose care he was, and I found that he was dead. He knows how quickly he recognised me again, how often he had described me and my leaving him at the school, and how he told him of a garret he recollected, which is the one I have spoken of, and in his father's house to this day. This is my story; I demand to be brought face to face with the schoolmaster, and put to any possible proof of any part of it, and I will show that it's too true, and that I have this guilt upon my soul."

"Unhappy man!" said the brothers. "What reparation can you make for this?"

"None, gentlemen, none! I have none to make, and nothing to hope now. I am old in years, and older still in misery and care. This confession can bring nothing upon me but new suffering and punishment; but I make it, and will abide by it whatever comes. I have been made the instrument of working out this dreadful retribution upon the head of a man who, in the hot pursuit of his bad ends, has persecuted and hunted down his own child to death. It must descend upon me too—I know it must fall—my reparation comes too late; and neither in this world nor in the next can I have hope again."

He had hardly spoken, when the lamp, which stood upon the table close to where Ralph was seated, and which was

the only one in the room, was thrown to the ground and left them in utter darkness. There was some trifling confusion in obtaining another light; the interval was a mere nothing; but when it appeared, Ralph Nickleby was gone.

The good brothers and Tim Linkinwater occupied some time in discussing the probability of his return, and when it became apparent that he would not come back, they hesitated whether or no to send after him. At length, remembering how strangely and silently he had sat in one immovable position during the interview, and thinking he might possibly be ill, they determined, although it was now very late, to send to his house on some pretence, and finding an excuse in the presence of Brooker, whom they knew not how to dispose of without consulting his wishes, they concluded to act upon this resolution before going to bed.

CHAPTER LXI.

WHEREIN NICHOLAS AND HIS SISTER FORFEIT THE GOOD OPINION OF ALL WORLDLY AND PRUDENT PEOPLE.

On the next morning after Brooker's disclosure had been made, Nicholas returned home. The meeting between him and those whom he had left there, was not without strong emotion on both sides, for they had been informed by his letters of what had occurred, and besides that his griefs were theirs, they mourned with him the death of one whose forlorn and helpless state had first established a claim upon their compassion, and whose truth of heart and grateful earnest nature had every day endeared him to them more and more.

"I am sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, wiping her eyes, and sobbing bitterly, "I have lost the best, the most zealous, and most attentive creature that has ever been a companion to me in my life—putting you, my dear Nicholas, and Kate, and your poor papa, and that well-behaved nurse who ran away with the linen and the twelve small forks, out of the question of course. Of all the tractable, equal-tempered,

attached, and faithful beings that ever lived, I believe he was the most so. To look round upon the garden now, that he took so much pride in, or to go into his room and see it filled with so many of those little contrivances for our comfort that he was so fond of making, and made so well, and so little thought he would leave unfinished—I can't bear it, I cannot really. Ah! This is a great trial to me, a great trial. It will be a comfort to you, my dear Nicholas, to the end of your life to recollect how kind and good you always were to him—so it will be to me to think what excellent terms we were always upon, and how fond he always was of me, poor fellow! It was very natural you should have been attached to him, my dear—very—and of course you were, and are very much cut up by this; I am sure it's only necessary to look at you and see how changed you are, to see that; but nobody knows what my feelings are—nobody can—it's quite impossible!"

While Mrs. Nickleby, with the utmost sincerity, gave vent to her sorrows after her own peculiar fashion of considering herself foremost, she was not the only one who indulged such feelings. Kate, although well accustomed to forget herself when others were to be considered, could not repress her grief; Madeline was scarcely less moved than she; and poor, hearty, honest, little Miss La Creevy, who had come upon one of her visits while Nicholas was away, and had done nothing since the sad news arrived but console and cheer them all, no sooner beheld him coming in at the door, than she sat herself down upon the stairs, and bursting into a flood of tears, refused for a long time to be comforted.

"It hurts me so," cried the poor body, "to see him come back alone. I can't help thinking what he must have suffered himself. I wouldn't mind so much if he gave way a little more, but he bears it so manfully."

"Why, so I should," said Nicholas, "should I not?"

"Yes, yes," replied the little woman, "and bless you for a good creature; but this does seem at first to a simple soul like me—I know it's wrong to say so, and I shall be sorry for it presently—this does seem such a poor reward for all you have done."

"Nay," said Nicholas gently, "what better reward could I have than the knowledge that his last days were peaceful and happy, and the recollection that I was his constant

companion, and was not prevented, as I might have been by a hundred circumstances, from being beside him?"

"To be sure," sobbed Miss La Creevy, "it's very true, and I'm an ungrateful, impious, wicked little fool, I know."

With that, the good soul fell to crying afresh, and, endeavouring to recover herself, tried to laugh. The laugh and the cry meeting each other thus abruptly had a struggle for the mastery, and the result was that it was a drawn battle, and Miss La Creevy went into hysterics.

Waiting until they were all tolerably quiet and composed again, Nicholas, who stood in need of some rest after his long journey, retired to his own room, and throwing himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed, fell into a sound sleep. When he awoke he found Kate sitting by his bedside, who, seeing that he had opened his eyes, stooped down to kiss him.

"I came to tell you how glad I am to see you home again."

"But I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Kate."

"We have been wearying so for your return," said Kate, "mama and I, and—and Madeline."

"You said in your last letter that she was quite well," said Nicholas, rather hastily, and colouring as he spoke. "Has nothing been said since I have been away about any future arrangements that the brothers have in contemplation for her?"

"Oh, not a word," replied Kate, "I can't think of parting from her without sorrow; and surely, Nicholas, *you* don't wish it."

Nicholas coloured again, and, sitting down beside his sister on a little couch near the window, said:

"No, Kate, no, I do not. I might strive to disguise my real feelings from anybody but you; but I will tell you that —briefly and plainly, Kate—that I love her."

Kate's eyes brightened, and she was going to make some reply, when Nicholas laid his hand upon her arm, and went on:

"Nobody must know this but you. She, last of all."

"Dear Nicholas!"

"Last of all—never, though never is a long day. Sometimes I try to think that the time may come when I may honestly tell her this; but it is so far off, in such distant perspective, so many years must elapse before it comes,

and when it does come (if ever) I shall be so unlike what I am now, and shall have so outlived my days of youth and romance—though not, I am sure, of love for her—that even I feel how visionary all such hopes must be, and try to crush them rudely myself and have the pain over, rather than suffer time to wither them, and keep the disappointment in store. No, Kate; since I have been absent, I have had, in that poor fellow who is gone, perpetually before my eyes another instance of the munificent liberality of these noble brothers. As far as in me lies I will deserve it, and if I have wavered in my bounden duty to them before, I am now determined to discharge it rigidly, and to put further delays and temptations beyond my reach."

"Before you say another word, dear Nicholas," said Kate, turning pale, "you must hear what I have to tell you. I came on purpose, but I had not the courage. What you say now gives me new heart." She faltered, and burst into tears.

There was that in her manner which prepared Nicholas for what was coming. Kate tried to speak, but her tears prevented her.

"Come, you foolish girl," said Nicholas; "why Kate, Kate, be a woman! I think I know what you would tell me. It concerns Mr. Frank, does it not?"

Kate sank her head upon his shoulder, and sobbed out "Yes."

"And he has offered you his hand, perhaps, since I have been away," said Nicholas; "is that it? Yes. Well, well; it's not so difficult, you see, to tell me, after all. He offered you his hand?"

"Which I refused," said Kate.

"Yes; and why?"

"I told him," she said, in a trembling voice, "all that I have since found you told mama, and while I could not conceal from him, and cannot from you that—that it was a pang and a great trial, I did so firmly, and begged him not to see me any more."

"That's my own brave Kate!" said Nicholas, pressing her to his breast. "I knew you would."

"He tried to alter my resolution," said Kate, "and declared that be my decision what it might, he would not only inform his uncles of the step he had taken, but would communicate it to you also, directly you returned. I am

afraid," she added, her momentary composure forsaking her, "I am afraid I may not have said strongly enough how highly I felt such disinterested love should be regarded, and how earnestly I prayed for his future happiness. If you do talk together, I should—I should like him to know that."

"And did you suppose, Kate, when you had made this sacrifice to what you knew was right and honourable, that I should shrink from mine?" said Nicholas tenderly.

"Oh, no! not if your position had been the same, but—"

"But it is the same," interrupted Nicholas; "Madeline is not the near relation of our benefactors, but she is closely bound to them by ties as dear, and I was first entrusted with her history, specially because they reposed unbounded confidence in me, and believed that I was as true as steel. How base would it be of me to take advantage of the circumstances which placed her here, or of the slight service I was happily able to render her, and to seek to engage her affections when the result must be, if I succeeded, that the brothers would be disappointed in their darling wish of establishing her as their own child, and that I must seem to hope to build my fortunes on their compassion for the young creature whom I had so meanly and unworthily entrapped, turning her very gratitude and warmth of heart to my own purpose and account, and trading in her misfortunes! I, too, whose duty and pride and pleasure, Kate, it is, to have other claims upon me which I will never forget, and who have the means of a comfortable and happy life already, and have no right to look beyond it! I have determined to remove this weight from my mind; I doubt whether I have not done wrong even now; and to-day I will without reserve or equivocation disclose my real reasons to Mr. Cheeryble, and implore him to take immediate measures for removing this young lady to the shelter of some other roof."

"To-day? so very soon!"

"I have thought of this for weeks, and why should I postpone it? If the scene through which I have just passed has taught me to reflect and awakened me to a more anxious and careful sense of duty, why should I wait until the impression has cooled? You would not dissuade me, Kate; now would you?"

"You may grow rich, you know," said Kate.

"I may grow rich!" repeated Nicholas, with a mournful smile, "ay, and I may grow old. But rich or poor, or old or young, we shall ever be the same to each other, and in that our comfort lies. What if we have but one home? It can never be a solitary one to you and me. What if we were to remain so true to these first impressions as to form no others? It is but one more link to the strong chain that binds us together. It seems but yesterday that we were playfellows, Kate, and it will seem but to-morrow that we are staid old people, looking back then to these cares as we look back now to those of our childish days, and recollecting with a melancholy pleasure that the time was when they could move us. Perhaps then, when we are quaint old folks and talk of the times when our step was lighter and our hair not grey, we may be even thankful for the trials that so endeared us to each other, and turned our lives into that current down which we shall have glided so peacefully and calmly. And having caught some inkling of our story, the young people about us—as young as you and I are now, Kate—shall come to us for sympathy, and pour distresses which hope and inexperience could scarcely feel enough for, into the compassionate ears of the old bachelor brother and his maiden sister."

Kate smiled through her tears as Nicholas drew this picture, but they were not tears of sorrow, although they continued to fall when he had ceased to speak.

"Am I not right, Kate?" he said, after a short silence.

"Quite, quite, dear brother; and I cannot tell you how happy I am that I have acted as you would have had me."

"You don't regret?"

"N—n—no," said Kate timidly, tracing some pattern upon the ground with her little foot. "I don't regret having done what was honourable and right, of course, but I do regret that this should have ever happened—at least sometimes I regret it, and sometimes I—I don't know what I say; I am but a weak girl, Nicholas, and it has agitated me very much"

It is no vaunt to affirm that if Nicholas had had ten thousand pounds at the minute, he would, in his generous affection for the owner of that blushing cheek and downcast eye, have bestowed its utmost farthing, in perfect forgetfulness of himself, to secure her happiness. But all he could do was to comfort and console her by kind words;

and words they were of such love and kindness and cheerful encouragement, that poor Kate threw her arms about his neck and declared she would weep no more.

"What man," thought Nicholas proudly, while on his way soon afterwards to the brothers' house, "would not be sufficiently rewarded for any sacrifice of fortune, by the possession of such a heart as that, which, but that hearts weigh light and gold and silver heavy, is beyond all praise. Frank has money and wants no more. Where would it buy him such a treasure as Kate! And yet, in unequal marriages, the rich party is always supposed to make a great sacrifice, and the other to get a good bargain! But I am thinking like a lover, or like an ass, which I suppose is pretty nearly the same."

Checking thoughts so little adapted to the business on which he was bound by such self-reproofs as this and many others no less sturdy, he proceeded on his way and presented himself before Tim Linkinwater.

"Ah! Mr. Nickleby," cried Tim, "God bless you! How d'ye do! Well? Say you're quite well and never better—do now."

"Quite," said Nicholas, shaking him by both hands.

"Ah!" said Tim, "you look tired though, now I come to look at you. Hark! there he is, d'ye hear him? That was Dick, the blackbird. He hasn't been himself since you've been gone. He'd never get on without you now; he takes as naturally to you, as he does to me."

"Dick is a far less sagacious fellow than I supposed him, if he thinks I am half as well worthy of his notice as you," replied Nicholas.

"Why, I'll tell you what, Sir," said Tim, standing in his favourite attitude and pointing up to the cage with the feather of his pen, "it's a very extraordinary thing about that bird, that the only people he ever takes the smallest notice of are Mr. Charles, and Mr. Ned, and you, and me."

Here Tim stopped and glanced anxiously at Nicholas; then unexpectedly catching his eye repeated, "And you and me, Sir, and you and me." And then he glanced at Nicholas again, and, squeezing his hand, said, "I am a bad one at putting off anything I am interested in. I didn't mean to ask you, but I should like to hear a few particulars about that poor boy. Did he mention Cheeryble Brothers at all?"

"Yes," said Nicholas, "many and many a time."

"That was right of him," returned Tim, wiping his eyes, "that was very right of him."

"And he mentioned your name a score of times," said Nicholas, "and often bade me carry back his love to Mr. Linkinwater."

"No, no, did he though?" rejoined Tim, sobbing outright. "Poor fellow! I wish we could have had him buried in town. There isn't such a burying-ground in all London as that little one on the other side of the square—there are counting-houses all round it, and if you go in there on a fine day you can see the books and safes through the open windows. And he sent his love to me, did he? I didn't expect he would have thought of me. Poor fellow, poor fellow! His love too!"

Tim was so completely overcome by this little mark of recollection, that he was quite unequal to any further conversation at the moment. Nicholas therefore slipped quietly out, and went to brother Charles's room.

If he had previously sustained his firmness and fortitude, it had been by an effort which had cost him no little pain; but the warm welcome, the hearty manner, the homely unaffected commiseration of the good old man went to his heart, and no inward struggle could prevent his showing it.

"Come, come, my dear Sir," said the benevolent merchant; "we must not be cast down; no, no. We must learn to bear misfortune, and we must remember that there are many sources of consolation even in death. Every day that this poor lad had lived, he must have been less and less qualified for the world, and more unhappy in his own deficiencies. It is better as it is, my dear Sir. Yes, yes, yes, it's better as it is."

"I have thought of all that, Sir," replied Nicholas, clearing his throat. "I feel it, I assure you."

"Yes, that's well," replied Mr. Cheeryble, who, in the midst of all his comforting, was quite as much taken aback as honest old Tim; "that's well. Where is my brother Ned? Tim Linkinwater, Sir, where is my brother Ned?"

"Gone out with Mr. Trimmers, about getting that unfortunate man into the hospital, and sending a nurse to his children," said Tim.

"My brother Ned is a fine fellow—a great fellow!" exclaimed brother Charles as he shut the door and returned

to Nicholas. "He will be overjoyed to see you, my dear Sir: we have been speaking of you every day."

"To tell you the truth, Sir, I am glad to find you alone," said Nicholas, with some natural hesitation, "for I am anxious to say something to you. Can you spare me a very few minutes?"

"Surely, surely," returned brother Charles, looking at him with an anxious countenance. "Say on, my dear Sir, say on."

"I scarcely know how or where to begin," said Nicholas. "If ever one mortal had reason to be penetrated with love and reverence for another, with such attachment as would make the hardest service in his behalf a pleasure and delight, with such grateful recollections as must rouse the utmost zeal and fidelity of his nature, those are the feelings which I should entertain for you, and do, from my heart and soul, believe me."

"I do believe you," replied the old gentleman, "and I am happy in the belief. I have never doubted it; I never shall. I am sure I never shall."

"Your telling me that so kindly," said Nicholas, "emboldens me to proceed. When you first took me into your confidence and despatched me on those missions to Miss Bray, I should have told you that I had seen her long before, that her beauty had made an impression upon me which I could not efface, and that I had fruitlessly endeavoured to trace her and become acquainted with her history. I did not tell you so, because I vainly thought I could conquer my weaker feelings, and render every consideration subservient to my duty to you."

"Mr. Nickleby," said brother Charles, "you did not violate the confidence I placed in you, or take an unworthy advantage of it. I am sure you did not."

"I did not," said Nicholas, firmly. "Although I found that the necessity for self-command and restraint became every day more imperious and the difficulty greater, I never for one instant spoke or looked but as I would have done had you been by. I never for one moment deserted my trust, nor have I to this instant. But I find that constant association and companionship with this sweet girl is fatal to my peace of mind, and may prove destructive to the resolutions I made in the beginning and up to this time have faithfully kept. In short, Sir, I cannot trust myself,

and I implore and beseech you to remove this young lady from under the charge of my mother and sister without delay. I know that to anyone but myself—to you who consider the immeasurable distance between me and this young lady, who is now your ward and the object of your peculiar care—my loving her even in thought must appear the height of rashness and presumption. I know it is so. But who can see her as I have seen—who can know what her life has been, and not love her? I have no excuse but that, and as I cannot fly from this temptation, and cannot repress this passion with its object constantly before me, what can I do but pray and beseech you to remove it, and to leave me to forget her!"

"Mr. Nickleby," said the old man, after a short silence, "you can do no more. I was wrong to expose a young man like you to this trial. I might have foreseen what would happen. Thank you, Sir, thank you. Madeline shall be removed."

"If you would grant me one favour, dear Sir, and suffer her to remember me with esteem by never revealing to her this confession—"

"I will take care," said Mr. Cheeryble. "And now, is this all you have to tell me?"

"No!" returned Nicholas, meeting his eye, "it is not."

"I know the rest," said Mr. Cheeryble, apparently very much relieved by this prompt reply. "When did it come to your knowledge?"

"When I reached home this morning."

"You felt it your duty immediately to come to me, and tell me what your sister no doubt acquainted you with?"

"I did," said Nicholas, "though I could have wished to have spoken to Mr. Frank first."

"Frank was with me last night," replied the old gentleman. "You have done well, Mr. Nickleby—very well, Sir—and I thank you again."

Upon this head Nicholas requested permission to add a few words. He ventured to hope that nothing he had said would lead to the estrangement of Kate and Madeline, who had formed an attachment for each other, any interruption of which would, he knew, be attended with great pain to them, and, most of all, with remorse and pain to him, as its unhappy cause. When these things were all forgotten he hoped that Frank and he might still be warm friends,

and that no word or thought of his humble home, or of her who was well contented to remain there and share his quiet fortunes, would ever again disturb the harmony between them. He recounted, as nearly as he could, what had passed between himself and Kate that morning; speaking of her with much warmth of pride and affection, and dwelling so cheerfully upon the confidence they had of overcoming any selfish regrets and living contented and happy in each other's love, that few could have heard him unmoved. More moved himself than he had been yet, he expressed in a few hurried words—as expressive perhaps as the most eloquent phrases—his devotion to the brothers, and his hope that he might live and die in their service.

To all this brother Charles listened in profound silence, and with his chair so turned from Nicholas that his face could not be seen. He had not spoken either in his accustomed manner, but with a certain stiffness and embarrassment very foreign to it. Nicholas feared he had offended him. He said, "No—no—he had done quite right," but that was all.

"Frank is a heedless, foolish fellow," he said, after Nicholas had paused for some time, "a very heedless, foolish fellow. I will take care that this is brought to a close without delay. Let us say no more upon the subject; it's a very painful one to me. Come to me in half an hour, I have strange things to tell you, my dear Sir, and your uncle has appointed this afternoon for your waiting upon him with me."

"Waiting upon him! With you, Sir!" cried Nicholas.

"Ay, with me," replied the old gentleman. "Return to me in half an hour, and I'll tell you more."

Nicholas waited upon him at the time mentioned, and then learnt all that had taken place on the previous day, and all that was known of the appointment Ralph had made with the brothers which was for that night, and for the better understanding of which it will be requisite to return and follow his own footsteps from the house of the twin brothers. Therefore we leave Nicholas somewhat reassured by the restored kindness of their manner towards him, and yet sensible that it was different from what it had been (though he scarcely knew in what respect), and full of uneasiness, uncertainty, and disquiet.

CHAPTER LXII.

RALPH MAKES ONE LAST APPOINTMENT—AND KEEPS IT.

Creeping from the house and slinking off like a thief; groping with his hands when first he got into the street, as if he were a blind man; and looking often over his shoulder while he hurried away, as though he were followed in imagination or reality by some one anxious to question or detain him; Ralph Nickleby left the City behind him and took the road to his own home.

The night was dark, and a cold wind blew, driving the clouds furiously and fast before it. There was one black, gloomy mass that seemed to follow him; not hurrying in the wild chase with the others, but lingering sullenly behind, and gliding darkly and stealthily on. He often looked back at this, and more than once stopped to let it pass over; but somehow, when he went forward again, it was still behind him, coming mournfully and slowly up like a shadowy funeral train.

He had to pass a poor, mean burial-ground—a dismal place, raised a few feet above the level of the street, and parted from it by a low parapet-wall and an iron railing; a rank, unwholesome, rotten spot, where the very grass and weeds seemed, in their frowsy growth, to tell that they had sprung from paupers' bodies, and struck their roots in the graves of men, sodden in steaming courts and drunken hungry dens. And here in truth they lay, parted from the living by a little earth and a board or two—lay thick and close—corrupting in body as they had in mind; a dense and squalid crowd. Here they lay cheek by jowl with life: no deeper down than the feet of the throng that passed there every day, and piled high as their throats. Here they lay, a grisly family, all these dear departed brothers and sisters of the ruddy clergyman who did his task so speedily when they were hidden in the ground!

As he passed here, Ralph called to mind that he had been one of a jury long before, on the body of a man who had cut his throat; and that he was buried in this place. He could not tell how he came to recollect it now when he had

so often passed and never thought about him, or how it was that he felt an interest in the circumstance; but he did both, and stopping, and clasping the iron railings with his hands, looked eagerly in, wondering which might be his grave.

While he was thus engaged, there came towards him, with noise of shouts and singing, some fellows full of drink, followed by others, who were remonstrating with them and urging them to go home in quiet. They were in high good-humour; and one of them, a little, weazen, hump-backed man, began to dance. He was a grotesque, fantastic figure, and the few bystanders laughed. Ralph himself was moved to mirth, and echoed the laugh of one who stood near and who looked round in his face. When they had passed on and he was left alone again, he resumed his speculation with a new kind of interest, for he recollected that the last person who had seen the suicide alive had left him very merry, and he remembered how strange he and the other jurors had thought that at the time.

He could not fix upon the spot among such a heap of graves, but he conjured up a strong and vivid idea of the man himself, and how he looked, and what had led him to do it, all of which he recalled with ease. By dint of dwelling upon this theme, he carried the impression with him when he went away; as he remembered when a child to have had frequently before him the figure of some goblin he had once seen chalked upon a door. But as he drew nearer and nearer home he forgot it again, and began to think how very dull and solitary the house would be inside.

This feeling became so strong at last, that when he reached his own door, he could hardly make up his mind to turn the key and open it—when he had done that and gone into the passage, he felt as though to shut it again would be to shut out the world. But he let it go, and it closed with a loud noise. There was no light. How very dreary, cold, and still it was!

Shivering from head to foot he made his way up stairs into the room where he had been last disturbed. He had made a kind of compact with himself that he would not think of what had happened until he got home. He was at home now, and suffered himself for the first time to consider it.

His own child—his own child! He never doubted the tale; he felt it was true; knew it as well now as if he had

been privy to it all along. His own child! And dead too. Dying beside Nicholas, loving him, and looking upon him as something like an angel! That was the worst.

They had all turned from him and deserted him in his very first need, even money could not buy them now; everything must come out, and everybody must know all. Here was the young lord dead, his companion abroad and beyond his reach, ten thousand pounds gone at one blow, his plot with Gride overset at the very moment of triumph, his after schemes discovered, himself in danger, the object of his persecution and Nicholas's love, his own wretched boy; everything crumbled and fallen upon him, and he beaten down beneath the ruins and grovelling in the dust.

If he had known his child to be alive, if no deceit had been ever practised and he had grown up beneath his eye, he might have been a careless, indifferent, rough, harsh father—like enough—he felt that; but the thought would come that he might have been otherwise, and that his son might have been a comfort to him and they two happy together. He began to think now, that his supposed death and his wife's flight had had some share in making him the morose, hard man he was. He seemed to remember a time when he was not quite so rough and obdurate; and almost thought that he had first hated Nicholas because he was young and gallant, and perhaps like the stripling who had brought dishonour and loss of fortune on his head.

But one tender thought, or one of natural regret in that whirlwind of passion and remorse, was as a drop of calm water in a stormy maddened sea. His hatred of Nicholas had been fed upon his own defeat, nourished on his interference with his schemes, fattened upon his old defiance and success. There were reasons for its increase; it had grown and strengthened gradually. Now it attained a height which was sheer wild lunacy. That his of all others should have been the hands to rescue his miserable child; that he should have been his protector and faithful friend; that he should have shown him that love and tenderness which from the wretched moment of his birth he had never known; that he should have taught him to hate his own parents and execrate his very name; that he should now know and feel all this and triumph in the recollection: was gall and madness to the usurer's heart. The dead boy's love for Nicholas, and the attachment of Nicholas to him,

was insupportable agony. The picture of his death-bed, with Nicholas at his side tending and supporting him, and he breathing out his thanks and expiring in his arms, when he would have had them mortal enemies and hating each other to the last, drove him frantic. He gnashed his teeth and smote the air, and looking wildly round, with eyes which gleamed through the darkness, cried aloud:

"I am trampled down and ruined. The wretch told me true. The night has come. Is there no way to rob them of further triumph, and spurn their mercy and compassion? Is there no devil to help me?"

Swiftly there glided again into his brain the figure he had raised that night. It seemed to lie before him. The head was covered now. So it was when he first saw it. The rigid, upturned, marble feet too, he remembered well. Then came before him the pale and trembling relatives who had told their tale upon the inquest—the shrieks of women—the silent dread of men—the consternation and disquiet—the victory achieved by that heap of clay which with one motion of its hand had let out the life and made this stir among them——

He spoke no more, but after a pause softly groped his way out of the room, and up the echoing stairs—up to the top—to the front garret—where he closed the door behind him, and remained—

It was a mere lumber-room now, but it yet contained an old dismantled bedstead: the one on which his son had slept, for no other had ever been there. He avoided it hastily, and sat down as far from it as he could.

The weakened glare of the lights in the street below, shining through the window which had no blind or curtain to intercept it, was enough to show the character of the room, though not sufficient fully to reveal the various articles of lumber, old corded trunks and broken furniture, which were scattered about. It had a shelving roof; higher in one part, and at another descending almost to the floor. It was towards the highest part that Ralph directed his eyes, and upon it he kept them fixed steadily for some minutes, then he rose, and dragging thither an old chest upon which he had been seated, mounted upon it, and felt along the wall above his head with both hands. At length they touched a large iron hook firmly driven into one of the beams.

At that moment he was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door below. After a little hesitation he opened the window, and demanded who it was.

"I want Mr. Nickleby," replied a voice.

"What with him?"

"That's not Mr. Nickleby's voice surely?" was the rejoinder.

It was not like it; but it was Ralph who spoke, and so he said.

The voice made answer that the twin brothers wished to know whether the man whom he had seen that night was to be detained, and that although it was now midnight they had sent in their anxiety to do right.

"Yes," cried Ralph, "detain him till to-morrow; then let them bring him here—him and my nephew—and come themselves, and be sure that I will be ready to receive them."

"At what hour?" asked the voice.

"At any hour," replied Ralph fiercely. "In the afternoon tell them. At any hour—at any minute—all times will be alike to me."

He listened to the man's retreating footsteps until the sound had passed, and then gazing up into the sky saw, or thought he saw, the same black cloud that had seemed to follow him home, and which now appeared to hover directly above the house.

"I know its meaning now," he muttered, "and the restless nights, the dreams, and why I have quailed of late;—all pointed to this. Oh! if men by selling their own souls could ride rampant for a term, for how short a term would I barter mine to-night!"

The sound of a deep bell came along the wind. One.

"Lie on!" cried the usurer, "with your iron tongue; ring merrily for births that make expectants writhe, and marriages that are made in hell, and toll ruefully for the dead whose shoes are worn already. Call men to prayers who are godly because not found out, and ring chimes for the coming in of every year that brings this cursed world nearer to its end. No bell or book for me; throw me on a dunghill, and let me rot there to infect the air!"

With a wild look around, in which frenzy, hatred, and despair, were horribly mingled, he shook his clenched hand at the sky above him, which was still dark and threatening, and closed the window.

The rain and hail pattered against the glass; the chimneys quaked and rocked; the crazy casement rattled with the wind as though an impatient hand inside were striving to burst it open. But no hand was there, and it opened no more.

"How's this?" cried one. "The gentlemen say they can't make anybody hear, and have been trying these two hours."

"And yet he came home last night," said another; "for he spoke to somebody out of that window up stairs."

They were a little knot of men, and, the window being mentioned, went out in the road to look up at it. This occasioned their observing that the house was still close shut, as the housekeeper had said she had left it on the previous night, and led to a great many suggestions, which terminated in two or three of the boldest getting round to the back and so entering by a window while the others remained outside in impatient expectation.

They looked into all the rooms below, opening the shutters as they went, to admit the fading light; and still finding nobody, and everything quiet and in its place, doubted whether they should go farther. One man, however, remarking that they had not yet been into the garret, and that it was there he had been last seen, they agreed to look there too, and went up softly, for the mystery and silence made them timid.

After they had stood for an instant on the landing eyeing each other, he who had proposed their carrying the search so far turned the handle of the door, and pushing it open, looked through the chink, and fell back directly.

"It's very odd," he whispered, "he's hiding behind the door! Look!"

They pressed forward to see, but one among them thrusting the others aside with a loud exclamation, drew a clasp knife from his pocket and dashing into the room cut down the body.

He had torn a rope from one of the old trunks and hanged himself on an iron hook immediately below the trap-door in the ceiling—in the very place to which the eyes of his son, a lonely, desolate, little creature, had so often been directed in childish terror fourteen years before.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE BROTHERS CHEERYBLE MAKE VARIOUS DECLARATIONS FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS; AND TIM LINKINWATER MAKES A DECLARATION FOR HIMSELF.

Some weeks had passed, and the first shock of these events had subsided. Madeline had been removed; Frank had been absent; and Nicholas and Kate had begun to try in good earnest to stifle their own regrets, and to live for each other and for their mother, who, poor lady, could in nowise be reconciled to this dull and altered state of affairs, when there came one evening, per favour of Mr. Linkinwater, an invitation from the Brothers, to dinner on the next day but one, comprehending not only Mrs. Nickleby, Kate, and Nicholas, but little Miss La Creevy, who was most particularly mentioned.

"Now, my dears," said Mrs. Nickleby, when they had done becoming honour to the bidding, and Tim had taken his departure, "what does *this* mean?"

"What do *you* mean, mother?" asked Nicholas, smiling.

"I say, my dear," rejoined that lady, with a face of unfathomable mystery, "what does this invitation to dinner mean,—what is its intention and object?"

"I conclude it means, that on such a day we are to eat and drink in their house, and that its intent and object is to confer pleasure upon us," said Nicholas.

"And that's all you conclude it is, my dear?"

"I have not yet arrived at anything deeper, mother."

"Then I'll just tell you one thing," said Mrs. Nickleby, "you'll find yourself a little surprised, that's all. You may depend upon it that this means something besides dinner."

"Tea and supper, perhaps," suggested Nicholas.

"I wouldn't be absurd, my dear, if I were you," replied Mrs. Nickleby, in a lofty manner, "because it's not by any means becoming, and doesn't suit you at all. What I mean to say is, that the Mr. Cheerybles don't ask us to dinner with all this ceremony for nothing. Never mind, wait and see. You won't believe anything I say, of course. It's

much better to wait, a great deal better, it's satisfactory to all parties, and there can be no disputing. All I say is, remember what I say now, and when I say I said so, don't say I didn't."

With this stipulation, Mrs. Nickleby, who was troubled night and day with a vision of a hot messenger tearing up to the door to announce that Nicholas had been taken into partnership, quitted that branch of the subject, and entered upon a new one.

"It's a very extraordinary thing," she said, "a most extraordinary thing, that they should have invited Miss La Creevy. It quite astonishes me, upon my word it does. Of course it's very pleasant that she should be invited, very pleasant, and I have no doubt that she'll conduct herself extremely well; she always does. It's very gratifying to think that we should have been the means of introducing her into such society, and I'm quite glad of it, quite rejoiced, for she certainly is an exceedingly well-behaved and good-natured little person. I could wish that some friend would mention to her how very badly she has her cap trimmed, and what very preposterous bows those are, but of course that's impossible; and if she likes to make a fright of herself, no doubt she has a perfect right to do so. We never see ourselves—never do and never did—and I suppose we never shall."

This moral reflection reminding her of the necessity of being peculiarly smart upon the occasion, so as to counterbalance Miss La Creevy, and be herself an effectual set-off and atonement, led Mrs. Nickleby into a consultation with her daughter relative to certain ribands, gloves, and trimmings, which, being a complicated question, and one of paramount importance, soon routed the previous one, and put it to flight.

The great day arriving, the good lady put herself under Kate's hands an hour or so after breakfast, and, dressing by easy stages, completed her toilet in sufficient time to allow of her daughter's making hers, which was very simple and not very long, though so satisfactory that she had never appeared more charming or looked more lovely. Miss La Creevy, too, arrived with two bandboxes (whereof the bottoms fell out as they were handed from the coach) and something in a newspaper, which a gentleman had sat upon, coming down, and which was obliged to be ironed again

before it was fit for service. At last everybody was dressed, including Nicholas, who had come home to fetch them, and they went away in a coach sent by the Brothers for the purpose: Mrs. Nickleby wondering very much what they would have for dinner, and cross-examining Nicholas as to the extent of his discoveries in the morning; whether he had smelt anything cooking, at all like turtle, and if not, what he had smelt; and diversifying the conversation with reminiscences of dinners to which she had gone some twenty years ago, concerning which she particularised not only the dishes but the guests, in whom her hearers did not feel a very absorbing interest, as not one of them had ever chanced to hear their names before.

The old butler received them with profound respect and many smiles, and ushered them into the drawing-room, where they were received by the Brothers with so much cordiality and kindness that Mrs. Nickleby was quite in a flutter, and had scarcely presence of mind enough even to patronise Miss La Creevy. Kate was still more affected by the reception, for knowing that the Brothers were acquainted with all that had passed between her and Frank, she felt her position a most delicate and trying one, and was trembling upon the arm of Nicholas when Mr. Charles took her in his, and led her to another part of the room.

"Have you seen Madeline, my dear," he said, "since she left your house?"

"No, Sir!" replied Kate. "Not once."

"And not heard from her, eh? Not heard from her."

"I have only had one letter," rejoined Kate, gently. "I thought she would not have forgotten me quite so soon."

"Ah!" said the old man, patting her on the head and speaking as affectionately as if she had been his favourite child. "Poor dear! what do you think of this, brother Ned? Madeline has only written to her once—only once, Ned, and she didn't think she would have forgotten her quite so soon, Ned."

"Oh! sad, sad—very sad!" said Ned.

The Brothers interchanged a glance, and looking at Kate for a little time without speaking, shook hands, and nodded as if they were congratulating each other upon something very delightful.

"Well, well," said brother Charles, "go into that room, my dear, that door yonder, and see if there's not a letter

for you from her. I think there's one upon the table. You needn't hurry back, my love, if there is, for we don't dine just yet, and there's plenty of time—plenty of time."

Kate retired as she was directed, and brother Charles, having followed her graceful figure with his eyes, turned to Mrs. Nickleby and said:

"We took the liberty of naming one hour before the real dinner-time, ma'am, because we had a little business to speak about, which would occupy the interval. Ned, my dear fellow, will you mention what we agreed upon? Mr. Nickleby, Sir, have the goodness to follow me."

Without any further explanation, Mrs. Nickleby, Miss La Creevy, and brother Ned, were left alone together, and Nicholas followed brother Charles into his private room, where to his great astonishment he encountered Frank whom he supposed to be abroad.

"Young men," said Mr. Cheeryble, "shake hands."

"I need no bidding to do that," said Nicholas, extending his.

"Nor I," rejoined Frank, as he clasped it heartily.

The old gentleman thought that two handsomer or finer young fellows could scarcely stand side by side than those on whom he looked with so much pleasure. Suffering his eyes to rest upon them for a short time in silence, he said, while he seated himself at his desk:

"I wish to see you friends—close and firm friends—and if I thought you otherwise, I should hesitate in what I am about to say. Frank, look here! Mr. Nickleby, will you come on the other side?"

The young men stepped up on either hand of brother Charles, who produced a paper from his desk and unfolded it.

"This," he said, "is a copy of the will of Madeline's maternal grandfather, bequeathing her the sum of twelve thousand pounds, payable either upon her coming of age or marrying. It would appear that this gentleman, angry with her (his only relation) because she would not put herself under his protection, and detach herself from the society of her father, in compliance with his repeated overtures, made a will leaving his property, which was all he possessed, to a charitable institution. He would seem to have repented this determination, however, for three weeks

afterwards, and in the same month, he executed this. By some fraud it was abstracted immediately after his decease, and the other—the only will found—was proved and administered. Friendly negotiations, which have only just now terminated, have been proceeding since this instrument came into our hands, and, as there is no doubt of its authenticity, and the witnesses have been discovered (after some trouble), the money has been refunded. Madeline has therefore obtained her right, and is, or will be, when either of the contingencies which I have mentioned have arisen, mistress of this fortune. You understand me?"

Frank replied in the affirmative. Nicholas, who could not trust himself to speak lest his voice should be heard to falter, bowed his head.

"Now, Frank," said the old gentleman, "you were the immediate means of recovering this deed. The fortune is but a small one, but we love Madeline, and such as it is, we would rather see you allied to her with that, than to any other girl we know who has three times the money. Will you become a suitor to her for her hand?"

"No, Sir; I interested myself in the recovery of that instrument, believing that her hand was already pledged to one who has a thousand times the claims upon her gratitude, and, if I mistake not, upon her heart, that I or any other man can ever urge. In this it seems I judged hastily."

"As you always do, Sir," cried brother Charles, utterly forgetting his assumed dignity, "as you always do. How dare you think, Frank, that we would have you marry for money, when youth, beauty, and every amiable virtue and excellence, were to be had for love? How dared you, Frank, go and make love to Mr. Nickleby's sister without telling us first what you meant to do, and letting us speak for you?"

"I hardly dared to hope."

"You hardly dared to hope! Then, so much the greater reason for having our assistance. Mr. Nickleby, Sir, Frank, although he judged hastily, judged for once correctly. Madeline's heart *is* occupied—give me your hand, Sir; it is occupied by you, and worthily and naturally. This fortune is destined to be yours, but you have a greater fortune in her, Sir, than you would have in money were it forty times told. She chooses you, Mr. Nickleby. She

chooses as we, her dearest friends, would have her choose. Frank chooses as we would have *him* choose. He should have your sister's little hand, Sir, if she had refused it a score of times—ay, he should, and he shall! You acted nobly not knowing our sentiments, but now you know them, Sir, and must do as you are bid. What! You are the children of a worthy gentleman! The time was, Sir, when my dear brother Ned and I were two poor simple-hearted boys, wandering almost barefoot to seek our fortunes; are we changed in anything but years and worldly circumstances since that time? No, God forbid! Oh, Ned, Ned, Ned, what a happy day this is for you and me; if our poor mother had only lived to see us now, Ned, how proud it would have made her dear heart at last!"

Thus apostrophised, brother Ned, who had entered with Mrs. Nickleby, and who had been before unobserved by the young men, darted forward, and fairly hugged brother Charles in his arms.

"Bring in my little Kate," said the latter, after a short silence. "Bring her in, Ned. Let me see Kate, let me kiss her. I have a right to do so now; I was very near it when she first came; I have often been very near it. Ah! Did you find the letter, my bird? Did you find Madeline herself, waiting for you and expecting you? Did you find that she had not quite forgotten her friend and nurse and sweet companion? Why, this is almost the best of all!"

"Come, come," said Ned, "Frank will be jealous, and we shall have some cutting of throats before dinner."

"Then let him take her away, Ned, let him take her away. Madeline's in the next room. Let all the lovers get out of the way, and talk among themselves, if they've anything to say. Turn 'em out, Ned, every one."

Brother Charles began the clearance by leading the blushing girl himself to the door, and dismissing her with a kiss. Frank was not very slow to follow, and Nicholas had disappeared first of all. So there only remained Mrs. Nickleby and Miss La Creevy, who were both sobbing heartily; the two brothers; and Tim Linkinwater, who now came in to shake hands with everybody, his round face all radiant and beaming with smiles.

"Well, Tim Linkinwater, Sir," said brother Charles, who was always spokesman, "now the young folks are happy, Sir."

"You didn't keep 'em in suspense as long as you said you would, though," returned Tim, archly. "Why, Mr. Nickleby and Mr. Frank were to have been in your room for I don't know how long; and I don't know what you weren't to have told them before you came out with the truth."

"Now, did you ever know such a villain as this, Ned?" said the old gentleman, "did you ever know such a villain as Tim Linkinwater? He accusing me of being impatient, and he the very man who has been wearying us morning, noon, and night, and torturing us for leave to go and tell 'em what was in store, before our plans were half complete, or we had arranged a single thing—a treacherous dog!"

"So he is, brother Charles," returned Ned, "Tim is a treacherous dog. Tim is not to be trusted. Tim is a wild young fellow—he wants gravity and steadiness; he must sow his wild oats, and then perhaps he'll become in time a respectable member of society."

This being one of the standing jokes between the old fellows and Tim, they all three laughed very heartily, and might have laughed much longer, but that the Brothers seeing that Mrs. Nickleby was labouring to express her feelings, and was really overwhelmed by the happiness of the time, took her between them, and led her from the room under pretence of having to consult her on some most important arrangements.

Now Tim and Miss La Creevy had met very often, and had always been very chatty and pleasant together—had always been great friends—and consequently it was the most natural thing in the world that Tim, finding that she still sobbed, should endeavour to console her. As Miss La Creevy sat on a large old-fashioned window-seat, where there was ample room for two, it was also natural that Tim should sit down beside her; and as to Tim's being unusually spruce and particular in his attire that day, why it was a high festival and a great occasion, and that was the most natural thing of all.

Tim sat down beside Miss La Creevy, and, crossing one leg over the other so that his foot—he had very comely feet, and happened to be wearing the neatest shoes and black silk stockings possible—should come easily within the range of her eye, said in a soothing way:

"Don't cry."

"I must," rejoined Miss La Creevy.

"No don't," said Tim. "Please don't; pray don't."

"I am so happy!" sobbed the little woman.

"Then laugh," said Tim, "do laugh."

What in the world Tim was doing with his arm it is impossible to conjecture, but he knocked his elbow against that part of the window which was quite on the other side of Miss La Creevy; and it is clear that it could have no business there.

"Do laugh," said Tim, "or I'll cry."

"Why should you cry?" asked Miss La Creevy, smiling.

"Because I'm happy too," said Tim. "We are both happy, and I should like to do as you do."

Surely there never was a man who fidgeted as Tim must have done then, for he knocked the window again—almost in the same place—and Miss La Creevy said she was sure he'd break it.

"I knew," said Tim, "that you would be pleased with this scene."

"It was very thoughtful and kind to remember me," returned Miss La Creevy. "Nothing could have delighted me half so much."

Why on earth should Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater have said all this in a whisper? It was no secret. And why should Tim Linkinwater have looked so hard at Miss La Creevy, and why should Miss La Creevy have looked so hard at the ground?

"It's a pleasant thing," said Tim, "to people like us, who have passed all our lives in the world alone, to see young folks that we are fond of brought together with so many years of happiness before them."

"Ah!" cried the little woman with all her heart, "that it is!"

"Although," pursued Tim—"although it makes one feel quite solitary and cast away—now don't it?"

Miss La Creevy said she didn't know. And why should she say she didn't know? Because she must have known whether it did or not.

"It's almost enough to make us get married after all, isn't it?" said Tim.

"Oh nonsense!" replied Miss La Creevy, laughing, "we are too old."

"Not a bit," said Tim, "we are too old to be single—

why shouldn't we both be married instead of sitting through the long winter evenings by our solitary firesides? Why shouldn't we make one fireside of it, and marry each other?"

"Oh, Mr. Linkinwater, you're joking!"

"No, no, I'm not. I'm not indeed," said Tim. "I will, if you will. Do, my dear!"

"It would make people laugh so."

"Let 'em laugh," cried Tim, stoutly, "we have good tempers I know, and we'll laugh too. Why what hearty laughs we have had since we've known each other!"

"So we have," cried Miss La Creevy—giving way a little, as Tim thought.

"It has been the happiest time in all my life—at least, away from the counting-house and Cheeryble Brothers," said Tim. "Do, my dear. Now say you will."

"No, no, we mustn't think of it," returned Miss La Creevy. "What would the Brothers say?"

"Why, God bless your soul!" cried Tim, innocently, "you don't suppose I should think of such a thing without their knowing it! Why, they left us here on purpose."

"I can never look 'em in the face again!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy, faintly.

"Come," said Tim, "let's be a comfortable couple. We shall live in the old house here, where I have been for four-and-forty year; we shall go to the old church, where I've been every Sunday morning all through that time; we shall have all my old friends about us—Dick, the archway, the pump, the flower-pots, and Mr. Frank's children, and Mr. Nickleby's children, that we shall seem like grandfather and grandmother to. Let's be a comfortable couple, and take care of each other. And if we should get deaf, or lame, or blind, or bed-ridden, how glad we shall be that we have somebody we are fond of always to talk to and sit with! Let's be a comfortable couple. Now do, my dear!"

Five minutes after this honest and straightforward speech, little Miss La Creevy and Tim were talking as pleasantly as if they had been married for a score of years, and had never once quarrelled all the time; and five minutes after that, when Miss La Creevy had bustled out to see if her eyes were red and put her hair to rights, Tim moved with a stately step towards the drawing-room, ex-

claiming as he went, "There an't such another woman in all London—I *know* there an't."

By this time the apoplectic butler was nearly in fits, in consequence of the unheard-of postponement of dinner. Nicholas, who had been engaged in a manner in which every reader may imagine for himself or herself, was hurrying down stairs in obedience to his angry summons when he encountered a new surprise.

Upon his way down, he overtook in one of the passages a stranger genteelly dressed in black who was also moving towards the dining-room. As he was rather lame and walked slowly Nicholas lingered behind, and was following him step by step, wondering who he was, when he suddenly turned round and caught him by both hands.

"Newman Noggs!" cried Nicholas joyfully.

"Ah! Newman, your own Newman, your own old faithful Newman. My dear boy, my dear Nick, I give you joy—health, happiness, every blessing. I can't bear it—it's too much, my dear boy—it makes a child of me!"

"Where have you been?" said Nicholas, "what have you been doing? How often have I inquired for you, and been told that I should hear before long!"

"I know, I know!" returned Newman. "They wanted all the happiness to come together. I've been helping 'em. I—I—look at me, Nick, look at me!"

"You would never let *me* do that," said Nicholas in a tone of gentle reproach.

"I didn't mind what I was, then. I shouldn't have had the heart to put on gentleman's clothes. They would have reminded me of old times and made me miserable; I am another man now, Nick. My dear boy, I can't speak; don't say anything to me—don't think the worse of me for these tears—you don't know what I feel to-day; you can't, and never will!"

They walked in to dinner, arm-in-arm, and sat down side by side.

Never was such a dinner as that since the world began. There was the superannuated bank clerk, Tim Linkinwater's friend; and there was the chubby old lady, Tim Linkinwater's sister; and there was so much attention from Tim Linkinwater's sister to Miss La Creevy, and there were so many jokes from the superannuated bank clerk, and Tim Linkinwater himself was in such tiptop spirits, and little

Miss La Creevy was in such a comical state, that of themselves they would have composed the pleasantest party conceivable. Then, there was Mrs. Nickleby, so grand and complacent; Madeline and Kate, so blushing and beautiful; Nicholas and Frank, so devoted and proud; and all four so silently and tremblingly happy; there was Newman so subdued yet so overjoyed, and there were the twin Brothers so delighted and interchanging such looks, that the old servant stood transfixed behind his master's chair, and felt his eyes grow dim as they wandered round the table.

When the first novelty of the meeting had worn off, and they began truly to feel how happy they were, the conversation became more general, and the harmony and pleasure if possible increased. The Brothers were in a perfect ecstacy; and their insisting on saluting the ladies all round before they would permit them to retire, gave occasion to the superannuated bank clerk to say so many good things that he quite outshone himself, and was looked upon as a prodigy of humour.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, taking her daughter aside directly they got upstairs, "you don't really mean to tell me that this is actually true about Miss La Creevy and Mr. Linkinwater?"

"Indeed it is, mama."

"Why, I never heard such a thing in my life!" exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby.

"Mr. Linkinwater is a most excellent creature," reasoned Kate, "and, for his age, quite young still."

"For *his* age, my dear!" returned Mrs. Nickleby. "Yes; nobody says anything against him, except that I think he is the weakest and most foolish man I ever knew. It's *her* age I speak of. That he should have gone and offered himself to a woman who must be—ah, half as old again as I am—and that she should have dared to accept him! It don't signify, Kate; I'm disgusted with her!"

Shaking her head very emphatically indeed, Mrs. Nickleby swept away; and all the evening, in the midst of the merriment and enjoyment that ensued, and in which with that exception she freely participated, conducted herself towards Miss La Creevy in a stately and distant manner, designed to mark her sense of the impropriety of her conduct, and to signify her extreme and cutting disapprobation of the misdemeanour she had so flagrantly committed.

CHAPTER LXIV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE IS RECOGNISED UNDER MELANCHOLY CIRCUMSTANCES, AND DOTHEBOYS HALL BREAKS UP FOR EVER.

Nicholas was one of those whose joy is incomplete unless it is shared by the friends of adverse and less fortunate days. Surrounded by every fascination of love and hope, his warm heart yearned towards plain John Browdie. He remembered their first meeting with a smile, and their second with a tear; saw poor Smike once again with the bundle on his shoulder trudging patiently by his side; and heard the honest Yorkshireman's rough words of encouragement as he left them on their road to London.

Madeline and he sat down, very many times, jointly to produce a letter which should acquaint John at full length with his altered fortunes, and assure him of his friendship and gratitude. It so happened, however, that the letter could never be written. Although they applied themselves to it with the best intentions in the world, it chanced that they always fell to talking about something else, and when Nicholas tried it by himself, he found it impossible to write one half of what he wished to say, or to pen anything, indeed, which on re-perusal did not appear cold and unsatisfactory compared with what he had in his mind. At last, after going on thus from day to day, and reproaching himself more and more, he resolved (the more readily as Madeline strongly urged him) to make a hasty trip into Yorkshire, and present himself before Mr. and Mrs. Browdie without a word of notice.

Thus it was that between seven and eight o'clock one evening, he and Kate found themselves in the Saracen's Head booking-office, securing a place to Greta Bridge by the next morning's coach. They had to go westward to procure some little necessaries for his journey, and, as it was a fine night, they agreed to walk there and ride home.

The place they had just been in called up so many recollections, and Kate had so many anecdotes of Madeline, and Nicholas so many anecdotes of Frank, and each was so in-

terested in what the other said, and both were so happy and confiding, and had so much to talk about, that it was not until they had plunged for a full half hour into that labyrinth of streets which lies between Seven Dials and Soho without emerging into any large thoroughfare, that Nicholas began to think it just possible they might have lost their way.

The possibility was soon converted into a certainty, for, on looking about, and walking first to one end of the street and then to the other, he could find no landmark he could recognise, and was fain to turn back again in quest of some place at which he could seek a direction.

It was a by-street, and there was nobody about, or in the few wretched shops they passed. Making towards a faint gleam of light, which streamed across the pavement from a cellar, Nicholas was about to descend two or three steps so as to render himself visible to those below and make his inquiry, when he was arrested by a loud noise of scolding in a woman's voice.

"Oh come away!" said Kate, "they are quarrelling. You'll be hurt."

"Wait one instant, Kate. Let us hear if there's anything the matter," returned her brother. "Hush!"

"You nasty, idle, vicious, good-for-nothing brute," cried the woman, stamping on the ground, "why don't you turn the mangle?"

"So I am, my life and soul!" replied a man's voice. "I am always turning, I am perpetually turning, like a demd old horse in a demnition mill. My life is one demd horrid grind!"

"Then why don't you go and list for a soldier?" retorted the woman, "you're welcome to."

"For a soldier!" cried the man. "For a soldier! Would his joy and gladness see him in a coarse red coat with a little tail? Would she hear of his being slapped and beat by drummers demnebly? Would she have him fire off real guns, and have his hair cut and his whiskers shaved, and his eyes turned right and left, and his trousers pipeclayed?"

"Dear Nicholas," whispered Kate, "you don't know who that is. It's Mr. Mantalini I am confident."

"Do make sure; peep at him while I ask the way," said Nicholas. "Come down a step or two—come."

Drawing her after him, Nicholas crept down the steps and looked into a small boarded cellar. There, amidst clothes-baskets and clothes, stripped to his shirt-sleeves, but wearing still an old patched pair of pantaloons of superlative make, a once brilliant waistcoat, and moustache and whiskers as of yore, but lacking their lustrous dye—there, endeavouring to mollify the wrath of a buxom female, the proprietress of the concern, and grinding meanwhile as if for very life at the mangle, whose creaking noise, mingled with her shrill tones, appeared almost to deafen him—there was the graceful, elegant, fascinating, and once dashing Mantalini.

"Oh you false traitor!" cried the lady, threatening personal violence on Mr. Mantalini's face.

"False! Oh dem! Now my soul, my gentle, captivating, bewitching, and most demnebly enslaving chick-a-biddy, be calm," said Mr. Mantalini, humbly.

"I won't!" screamed the woman. "I'll tear your eyes out!"

"Oh! What a demd savage lamb!" cried Mr. Mantalini.

"You're never to be trusted," screamed the woman, "you were out all day yesterday, and gallivanting somewhere I know—you know you were. Isn't it enough that I paid two pound fourteen for you, and took you out of prison and let you live here like a gentleman, but must you go on like this: breaking my heart besides?"

"I will never break its heart, I will be a good boy, and never do so any more; I will never be naughty again; I beg its little pardon," said Mr. Mantalini, dropping the handle of the mangle, and folding his palms together, "it is all up with its handsome friend, he has gone to the demnition bow-wows. It will have pity? It will not scratch and claw, but pet and comfort? Oh, demmit."

Very little affected, to judge from her action, by this tender appeal, the lady was on the point of returning some angry reply, when Nicholas, raising his voice, asked his way to Piccadilly.

Mr. Mantalini turned round, caught sight of Kate, and, without another word, leapt at one bound into a bed which stood behind the door, and drew the counterpane over his face, kicking meanwhile convulsively.

"Demmit," he cried, in a suffocating voice, "it's little

Nickleby! Shut the door, put out the candle, turn me up in the bedstead; oh, dem, dem, dem!"

The woman looked, first at Nicholas, and then at Mr. Mantalini, as if uncertain on whom to visit this extraordinary behaviour; but Mr. Mantalini happening by ill luck to thrust his nose from under the bedclothes, in his anxiety to ascertain whether the visitors were gone, she suddenly, and with a dexterity which could only have been acquired by long practice, flung a pretty heavy clothes-basket at him, with so good an aim that he kicked more violently than before, though without venturing to make any effort to disengage his head, which was quite extinguished. Thinking this a favourable opportunity for departing before any of the torrent of her wrath discharged itself upon him, Nicholas hurried Kate off, and left the unfortunate subject of this unexpected recognition to explain his conduct as he best could.

The next morning he began his journey. It was now cold, winter weather, forcibly recalling to his mind under what circumstances he had first travelled that road, and how many vicissitudes and changes he had since undergone. He was alone inside the greater part of the way, and sometimes, when he had fallen into a doze, and, rousing himself, looked out of the window, and recognised some place which he well remembered as having passed either on his journey down, or in the long walk back with poor Smike, he could hardly believe but that all which had since happened had been a dream, and that they were still plodding wearily on towards London, with the world before them.

To render these recollections the more vivid, it came on to snow as night set in, and passing through Stamford and Grantham, and by the little alehouse where he had heard the story of the bold Baron of Grogzwig, everything looked as if he had seen it but yesterday, and not even a flake of the white crust upon the roofs had melted away. Encouraging the train of ideas which flocked upon him, he could almost persuade himself that he sat again outside the coach, with Squeers and the boys, that he heard their voices in the air, and that he felt again, but with a mingled sensation of pain and pleasure now, that old sinking of the heart and longing after home. While he was yet yielding himself up to these fancies he fell asleep, and, dreaming of Madeline, forgot them.

He slept at the inn at Greta Bridge on the night of his arrival, and, rising at a very early hour next morning, walked to the market town, and inquired for John Browdie's house. John lived in the outskirts now he was a family man, and, as everybody knew him, Nicholas had no difficulty in finding a boy who undertook to guide him to his residence.

Dismissing his guide at the gate, and in his impatience not even stopping to admire the thriving look of cottage or garden either, Nicholas made his way to the kitchen door, and knocked lustily with his stick.

"Halloa!" cried a voice inside, "waa't be the matther noo? Be the toon a-fire? Ding, but thou mak'st noise eneaf!"

With these words John Browdie opened the door himself, and opening his eyes to their utmost width, cried, as he clapped his hands together and burst into a hearty roar:

"Ecod, it be the godfeyther, it be the godfeyther! Tilly, here be Misther Nickleby. Gi' us thee hond, mun. Coom awa', coom awa'. In wi' 'un, doon beside the fire; tak' a soop o' thot. Dinnot say a word till thou'st droonk it a', oop wi' it, mun. Ding! but I'm reeght glod to see thee."

Adapting his action to his text, John dragged Nicholas into the kitchen, forced him down upon a huge settle beside a blazing fire, poured out from an enormous bottle about a quarter of a pint of spirits, thrust it into his hand, opened his mouth and threw back his head as a sign to him to drink it instantly, and stood with a broad grin of welcome overspreading his great red face, like a jolly giant.

"I might ha' knowa'd," said John, "that nobody but thou would ha' coom wi' sike a knock as yon. Thot was the wa' thou knocked at schoolmeasther's door, eh? Ha, ha, ha! But I say—waa't be a' this aboot schoolmeasther?"

"You know it then?" said Nicholas.

"They were talking aboot it doon toon last neeght," replied John, "but neane on 'em seemed quite to un'erstan' it loike."

"After various shiftings and delays," said Nicholas, "he has been sentenced to be transported for seven years, for being in the unlawful possession of a stolen will; and after that, he has to suffer the consequence of a conspiracy."

"Whew!" cried John, "a conspiracy! Soomat in the pooder plot wa'—eh? Soomat in the Guy Faurx line?"

"No, no, no, a conspiracy connected with his school; I'll explain it presently."

"Thot's reeght!" said John, "explain it arter breakfast, not noo, for thou bee'st hoongry, and so am I; and Tilly she mun' be at the bottom o' a' explanations, for she says thot's the mutual confidence. Ha, ha, ha! Ecod it's a room start is the mutual confidence!"

The entrance of Mrs. Browdie, with a smart cap on and very many apologies for their having been detected in the act of breakfasting in the kitchen, stopped John in his discussion of this grave subject, and hastened the breakfast: which, being composed of vast mounds of toast, new-laid eggs, boiled ham, Yorkshire pie, and other cold substantials (of which heavy relays were constantly appearing from another kitchen under the direction of a very plump servant), was admirably adapted to the cold bleak morning, and received the utmost justice from all parties. At last, it came to a close; and the fire which had been lighted in the best parlour having by this time burnt up, they adjourned thither to hear what Nicholas had to tell.

Nicholas told them all, and never was there a story which awakened so many emotions in the breasts of two eager listeners. At one time honest John groaned in sympathy, and at another roared with joy; at one time he vowed to go up to London on purpose to get a sight of the Brothers Cheeryble, and at another swore that Tim Linkinwater should receive such a ham by coach, and carriage free, as mortal knife had never carved. When Nicholas began to describe Madeline, he sat with his mouth wide open, nudging Mrs. Browdie from time to time, and exclaiming under his breath that she must be "raa'ther a tidy sort," and when he heard at last that his young friend had come down purposely to communicate his good fortune, and to convey to him all those assurances of friendship which he could not state with sufficient warmth in writing —that the only object of his journey was to share his happiness with them, and to tell them that when he was married they must come up to see him, and that Madeline insisted on it as well as he—John could hold out no longer, but after looking indignantly at his wife and demanding to know what she was whimpering for, drew his coat-sleeve over his eyes and blubbered outright.

"Tell'ee waa't though," said John seriously, when a

great deal had been said on both sides, "to return to school measther; if this news aboot 'un has reached school to-day, the old 'ooman wean't have a whole boan in her boddy, nor Fanny neither."

"Oh John!" cried Mrs. Browdie.

"Ah! and Oh John agean," replied the Yorkshireman. "I dinnot know what they lads mightn't do. When it first got aboot that schoolmeasther was in trouble some feythers and moothers sent and took their young chaps awa'. If them as is left should know waa'ts coom tiv'un, there'll be sike a revolution and rebel!—Ding! But I think they'll a' gang daft, and spill bluid like wather!"

In fact John Browdie's apprehensions were so strong that he determined to ride over to the school without delay, and invited Nicholas to accompany him, which however he declined, pleading that his presence might perhaps aggravate the bitterness of their adversity.

"Thot's true!" said John, "I should ne'er ha' thought o' thot."

"I must return to-morrow," said Nicholas, "but I mean to dine with you to-day, and if Mrs. Browdie can give me a bed——"

"Bed!" cried John, "I wish thou couldst sleep in fower beds at once. Ecod thou should'st have 'em 'a. Bide till I coom back, on'y bide till I coom back, and ecod we'll mak a day of it!"

Giving his wife a hearty kiss, and Nicholas a no less hearty shake of the hand, John mounted his horse and rode off: leaving Mrs. Browdie to apply herself to hospitable preparations, and his young friend to stroll about the neighbourhood, and revisit spots which were rendered familiar to him by many a miserable association.

John cantered away, and arriving at Dotheboys Hall, tied his horse to a gate and made his way to the school-room door, which he found locked on the inside. A tremendous noise and riot arose from within, and, applying his eye to a convenient crevice in the wall, he did not remain long in ignorance of its meaning.

The news of Mr. Squeers's downfall had reached Dotheboys; that was quite clear. To all appearance it had very recently become known to the young gentlemen, for the rebellion had just broken out.

It was one of the brimstone-and-treacle mornings, and

Mrs. Squeers had entered school according to custom with the large bowl and spoon, followed by Miss Squeers and the amiable Wackford, who during his father's absence had taken upon him such minor branches of the executive as kicking the pupils with his nailed boots, pulling the hair of some of the smaller boys, pinching the others in aggravating places, and rendering himself in various similar ways a great comfort and happiness to his mother. Their entrance, whether by premeditation or a simultaneous impulse, was the signal of revolt. While one detachment rushed to the door and locked it, and another mounted upon the desks and forms, the stoutest (and consequently the newest) boy seized the cane, and, confronting Mrs. Squeers with a stern countenance, snatched off her cap and beaver-bonnet, put it on his own head, armed himself with the wooden spoon, and bade her, on pain of death, go down upon her knees, and take a dose directly. Before that estimable lady could recover herself or offer the slightest retaliation, she was forced into a kneeling posture by a crowd of shouting tormentors, and compelled to swallow a spoonful of the odious mixture, rendered more than usually savoury by the immersion in the bowl of Master Wackford's head, whose ducking was entrusted to another rebel. The success of this first achievement prompted the malicious crowd, whose faces were clustered together in every variety of lank and half-starved ugliness, to further acts of outrage. The leader was insisting upon Mrs. Squeers repeating her dose, Master Squeers was undergoing another dip in the treacle, and a violent assault had been commenced on Miss Squeers, when John Browdie, bursting open the door with one vigorous kick, rushed to the rescue. The shouts, screams, groans, hoots, and clapping of hands, suddenly ceased, and a dead silence ensued.

"Ye be noice chaps," said John, looking steadily round. "Waa't's to do here, thou yoong dogs!"

"Squeers is in prison, and we are going to run away!" cried a score of shrill voices. "We won't stop, we won't stop!"

"Weel then, dinnot stop," replied John, "who waants thee to stop? Roon awa' loike men, but dinnot hurt the women."

"Hurrah!" cried the shrill voices, more shrilly still.

"Hurrah!" repeated John. "Weel, hurrah loike men too. Noo then, look out. Hip—hip—hip—hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" cried the voices.

"Hurrah agean," said John. "Looder still."

The boys obeyed.

"Anoother!" said John. "Dinnot be afeared on it. Let's have a good 'un."

"Hurrah!"

"Noo then," said John, "let's have yan more to end wi', and then coot off as quick as you loike. Tak' a good breath noo—Squeers be in jail—the school's brokken oop—it's a' ower—past and gane—think o' thot, and let it be a hearty 'un. Hurrah!"

Such a cheer arose as the walls of Dotheboys Hall had never echoed before, and were destined never to respond to again. When the sound had died away the school was empty, and of the busy noisy crowd which had peopled it but five minutes before, not one remained.

"Very well, Mr. Browdie!" said Miss Squeers, hot and flushed from the recent encounter, but vixenish to the last; "you've been and excited our boys to run away. Now see if we don't pay you out for that, Sir! If my pa *is* unfortunate and trod down by henemies, we're not going to be basely crowed and conquered over by you and Tilda."

"Noa!" replied John bluntly, "thou bean't. Tak' thy oath o' thot. Think betther o' us, Fanny. I tell 'ee both that I'm glod the auld man has been caught out at last—dom'd glod—but ye'll sooffer eneaf wi'out any crowin' fra' me, and I be not the mun to crow nor be Tilly the lass, so I tell 'ee flat. More than thot, I tell 'ee noo, that if thou need'st friends to help thee awa' from this place—dinnot turn up thy nose, Fanny, thou may'st—thou'lt foind Tilly and I wi' a thout o' old times aboot us, ready to lend thee a hond. And when I say thot, dinnot think I be asheamed of waa't I've deane, for I say agean, Hurrah! And dom the schoolmeasther—there!"

His parting words concluded, John Browdie strode heavily out, remounted his nag, put him once more into a smart canter, and, carolling lustily forth some fragments of an old song, to which the horse's hoofs rang a merry accompaniment, sped back to his pretty wife and to Nicholas.

For some days afterwards the neighbouring country was overrun with boys, who, the report went, had been secretly furnished by Mr. and Mrs. Browdie, not only with a hearty meal of bread and meat, but with sundry shillings and sixpences to help them on their way. To this rumour John

always returned a stout denial, which he accompanied, however, with a lurking grin, that rendered the suspicious doubtful, and fully confirmed all previous believers in their opinion.

There were a few timid young children, who, miserable as they had been, and many as were the tears they had shed in the wretched school, still knew no other home, and had formed for it a sort of attachment which made them weep when the bolder spirits fled, and cling to it as a refuge. Of these, some were found crying under hedges and in such places, frightened at the solitude. One had a dead bird in a little cage; he had wandered nearly twenty miles, and when his poor favourite died, lost courage, and lay down beside him. Another was discovered in a yard hard by the school, sleeping with a dog, who bit at those who came to remove him, and licked the sleeping child's pale face.

They were taken back, and some other stragglers were recovered, but by degrees they were claimed, or lost again; and in course of time Dotheboys Hall and its last breaking up began to be forgotten by the neighbours, or to be only spoken of as among the things that had been.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

When her term of mourning had expired, Madeline gave her hand and fortune to Nicholas, and on the same day and at the same time Kate became Mrs. Frank Cheeryble. It was expected that Tim Linkinwater and Miss La Creevy would have made a third couple on the occasion, but they declined, and two or three weeks afterwards went out together one morning before breakfast, and coming back with merry faces, were found to have been quietly married that day.

The money which Nicholas acquired in right of his wife he invested in the firm of Cheeryble Brothers, in which Frank had become a partner. Before many years elapsed, the business began to be carried on in the names of "Cheer-

yble and Nickleby," so that Mrs. Nickleby's prophetic anticipations were realised at last.

The twin brothers retired. Who needs to be told that *they* were happy? They were surrounded by happiness of their own creation, and lived but to increase it.

Tim Linkinwater condescended, after much entreaty and brow-beating, to accept a share in the house, but he could never be prevailed upon to suffer the publication of his name as a partner, and always persisted in the punctual and regular discharge of his clerkly duties.

He and his wife lived in the old house, and occupied the very bedchamber in which he had slept for four-and-forty years. As his wife grew older, she became even a more cheerful and light-hearted little creature; and it was a common saying among their friends, that it was impossible to say which looked the happier—Tim as he sat calmly smiling in his elbow-chair on one side of the fire, or his brisk little wife chatting and laughing, and constantly bustling in and out of hers, on the other.

Dick, the blackbird, was removed from the counting-house and promoted to a warm corner in the common sitting-room. Beneath his cage hung two miniatures, of Mrs. Linkinwater's execution: one representing herself and the other Tim, and both smiling very hard at all beholders. Tim's head being powdered like a Twelfth Cake, and his spectacles copied with great nicety, strangers detected a close resemblance to him at the first glance, and this leading them to suspect that the other must be his wife, and emboldening them to say so without scruple, Mrs. Linkinwater grew very proud of these achievements in time, and considered them among the most successful likenesses she had ever painted. Tim had the profoundest faith in them likewise, for upon this, as upon all other subjects, they held but one opinion, and if ever there were a "comfortable couple" in the world, it was Mr. and Mrs. Linkinwater.

Ralph, having died intestate, and having no relations but those with whom he had lived in such enmity, they would have become in legal course his heirs. But they could not bear the thought of growing rich on money so acquired, and felt as though they could never hope to prosper with it. They made no claim to his wealth; and the riches for which he had toiled all his days, and bur-

dened his soul with so many evil deeds, were swept at last into the coffers of the State, and no man was the better or the happier for them.

Arthur Gride was tried for the unlawful possession of the will, which he had either procured to be stolen, or dishonestly acquired and retained by other means as bad. By dint of an ingenious counsel, and a legal flaw, he escaped, but only to undergo a worse punishment; for some years afterwards his house was broken open in the night by robbers, tempted by the rumours of his great wealth, and he was found horribly murdered in his bed.

Mrs. Sliderskew went beyond the seas at nearly the same time as Squeers, and in the course of nature never returned. Brooker died penitent. Sir Mulberry Hawk lived abroad for some years, courted and caressed, and in high repute as a fine dashing fellow; and ultimately, returning to this country, was thrown into jail for debt, and there perished miserably, as such high, noble spirits generally do.

The first act of Nicholas, when he became a rich and prosperous merchant, was to buy his father's old house. As time crept on, and there came gradually about him a group of lovely children, it was altered and enlarged, but none of the old rooms were ever pulled down, no old tree was rooted up, nothing with which there was any association of bygone times was ever removed or changed.

Within a stone's-throw was another retreat, enlivened by children's pleasant voices too, and here was Kate, with many new cares and occupations, and many new faces courting her sweet smile (and one so like her own, that to her mother she seemed a child again), the same true gentle creature, the same fond sister, the same in the love of all about her, as in her girlish days.

Mrs. Nickleby lived sometimes with her daughter, and sometimes with her son, accompanying one or other of them to London at those periods when the cares of business obliged both families to reside there, and always preserving a great appearance of dignity, and relating her experiences (especially on points connected with the management and bringing-up of children) with much solemnity and importance. It was a very long time before she could be induced to receive Mrs. Linkinwater into favour, and it is even doubtful whether she ever thoroughly forgave her.

There was one grey-haired, quiet, harmless gentleman, who, winter and summer, lived in a little cottage hard by Nicholas's house, and, when he was not there, assumed the superintendence of affairs. His chief pleasure and delight was in the children, with whom he was a child himself, and master of the revels. The little people could do nothing without dear Newman Noggs.

The grass was green above the dead boy's grave, and trodden by feet so small and light, that not a daisy drooped its head beneath their pressure. Through all the spring and summer-time, garlands of fresh flowers wreathed by infant hands rested upon the stone, and, when the children came to change them lest they should wither and be pleasant to him no longer, their eyes filled with tears, and they spoke low and softly of their poor dead cousin.

NOTES ON NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

BEFORE the publication of this novel frequent plagiarisms of his former works had annoyed Dickens. A certain E. Lloyd, of Wych Street, London, figured prominently among the pirates.

Dickens was so incensed by these bastard productions that, on the eve of the appearance of the first number of "Nickleby," he issued a Proclamation, which was inserted in various reviews and magazines at the time. It commenced thus:

"WHEREAS we are the only true and lawful 'Boz,' and WHEREAS it hath been reported to us, who are commencing a NEW WORK to be called—'The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby,' that some dishonest dullards, resident in the cellars and by-streets of this town, impose upon the unwary and credulous, by producing cheap and wretched imitations of our delectable Works. And WHEREAS we derive but small comfort under this injury, from the knowledge that the dishonest dullards aforesaid, cannot, by reason of their mental smallness, follow near our heels, but are constrained to keep along by dirty and little frequented ways, at a most respectful and humble distance behind.

"And WHEREAS, in like manner, as some other vermin are not worth the killing for the sake of their carcasses, so these kennel pirates are not worth the powder and shot of the law, inasmuch as whatever damages they may commit, they are in no condition to pay any.

"THIS IS TO GIVE NOTICE

"FIRSTLY,

"*To Pirates.*

"That we have at length devised a mode of execution for them, so summary and terrible, that if any gang or gangs thereof presume to hoist but one thread of the

colours of the good ship Nickleby, we will hang them on gibbets so lofty and enduring, that their remains will be a monument of our just vengeance to all succeeding ages; and it shall not lie in any power of any Lord High Admiral on earth to cause them to be taken down again . . ." (etc.).

Apparently this curious threat produced no effect, as the objectionable plagiarisms were as numerous as ever. For instance, E. Lloyd was again to the front with a remarkable production entitled "Nickelas Nickelbery," by "Bos," which contained "the Adventures, Miss-adventures,—Chances, Mis-chances,—Fortunes, Mis-fortunes, —Mysteries,—Mis-eries—and Miscellaneous Manœuvres of the Family of Nickelbery." It was issued in penny weekly numbers and fourpenny monthly parts, profusely illustrated, and parodied the whole of the story and characters under slightly altered names. Then, in 1840, appeared "Scenes from the Life of Nickleby Married," which was also issued in parts, with green wrappers and twenty-one etchings by "Quiz," in the style of "Phiz," but artistically much inferior. This ambitious work, comprising more than five hundred pages of text, "edited by 'Guess,'" and purporting to be a sequel to Dickens's story, contained an account of "certain remarkable passages and strange adventures that befell the Nickleby Family." "The Nickleby Papers," by "Poz," was another of these wonderful compilations; it was issued in penny numbers, and, although said to be stupid and dull, had a ready sale. Concerning it Dr. Mackenzie, in his "Life of Dickens," states that the narrative begins ten years after the close of the real story, and reintroduces Squeers, who had served out his seven years' transportation in Botany Bay, but whose morals had not been improved by the change of scene. This book seems to have had a great attraction for the lower class of Londoners.

CHAPTER I.

"There once lived in a sequestered part of the county of Devonshire, one Mr. Godfrey Nickleby."

Dickens commenced the new story on the very day of his return home with his hastily-scribbled notes and

memoranda. Although engaged upon "Oliver Twist" until its completion in September, he worked hard at "Nickleby," and his correspondence at this date shows that he never had a single number ready in advance—indeed, in some instances, it was uncertain whether he would come up to time. On the 7th of February, 1838 (which was his birthday anniversary), he wrote to Mr. Forster: "I *have* begun! I wrote four slips last night, so you see the beginning is made. And what is more, I can go on: so I hope the book is in training at last." A fortnight later he announced the completion of the first chapter.

CHAPTER XV.

"Newman Noggs accordingly read [Fanny Squeers's letter] as follows:"

This letter—which is one of the few remaining fragments in manuscript of the story—Leigh Hunt was fond of comparing favourably with similar things in Smollett's "Humphrey Clinker," where the following choice specimen from the pen of Winifred Jenkins, a house-maid in the Bramble family, is to be found.

"I could not rite by John Thomas, for because he went away in a huff, at a minute's warning. He and Chowder could not agree, and so they fitt upon the road, and Chowder bit his thumb, and he swore he would do him a mischief, and he spoke saucy to mistress, whereby the 'squire turned him off in gudgeon; and by God's providence we picked up another footman, called Umphry Klinker, a good sole as ever broke bread; which shows that a scalded cat may pruve a good mouser, and a hound be stanch, thof he has got narro hare on his buttocks; but the proudest nose may be bro't baor to the grindstone by sickness and misfortunes.

"O Molly, what shall I say of London? All the towns that ever I beheld in my born days are no more than Welsh barrows and crumlecks to this wonderful sitty! Even Bath itself is but a fillitch, in the naam of God, one would think there's no end of the streets, but the Lands End. Then there's such a power of people, going hurry skurry! Such a racket of coxes! Such a noise and

hali-balloo! So many strange sites to be seen! O gracious! my poor Welsh brain has been spinning like a top ever since I came hither! And I have seen the Park, and the Paleass of Saint Gimeses, and the king's and the queen's magisterial pursing, and the sweet young princes, and the hillyfents, and pybald ass, and all the rest of the royal family.

* * * * * *

"I was afterwards of a party at Sadler's Wells, where I saw such tumbling and dancing upon ropes and wires, that I was frightened, and ready to go into a fit—I thought it was all enchantment; and believing myself bewitched, began for to cry. You know as how the witches in Wales fly upon broomsticks, but here was flying without any broomstick, or thing in the varsal world, and firing of pistols in the air, and blowing of trumpets, and swinging, and rolling of wheel-barrows upon a wire (God bliss us!) no thicker than a sewing thread; that, to be sure, they must deal with the devil. A fine gentleman with a pig's tail, and a golden sord by his side, came to comfit me, and offered for to treat me with a pint of wind; but I would not stay; and so in going through the dark passage, he began to show his cloven futt, and went for to be rude; my fellow-servant Umphry Klinker bid him to be sivil, and he gave the young man a dowse in the chops; but, i'fackins, Mr. Clinker wa'n't long in his debt—with a good oaken sapling he dusted his doublet, for all his golden cheese toaster; and, fipping me under his arm, carried me huom, I nose not how, being I was in such a flustration. But, thank God! I'm now vaned from all such vanities; for what are all those rarities and vagaries to the glories that shall be revealed hereafter? O Molly! let not your poor heart be puffed up with vanity."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"'I fear,' said Kate, hesitating, 'that mamma—my mother, I mean—is waiting for me.'"

When John Forster read the conversation between Mrs. Nickleby and Miss Knag, of which the quoted sentence is a preliminary, he told Dickens that the dialogue suggested

the passage dealing with Miss Bates in "Emma." But it seems that Dickens was not familiar with that book, nor with any novels of its author, Jane Austen. It may also be remarked here that the number of Nickleby containing this eighteenth chapter vanquished the stubborn attitude towards Dickens which Sydney Smith long held. Writing to Sir George Phillips in September, 1838, he said: "Nickleby is very good. I stood out against Mr. Dickens as long as I could, but he has conquered me."

CHAPTER XXX.

"Nicholas was somewhat at a loss, on entering the theatre at night, to account for the unusual perturbation."

It is worth while to compare the visit of the London theatrical manager with a similar episode in Thackeray's "Pendennis," Vol. I. Chapter XIV., of which the following is an excerpt:

"Within a short period of the events above narrated, Mr. Manager Bingley was performing his famous character of Rolla, in 'Pizarro,' to a house so exceedingly thin, that it would appear as if the part of Rolla was by no means such a favourite with the people of Chatteris as it was with the accomplished actor himself. Scarce anybody was in the theatre. Poor Pen had the boxes almost all to himself, and sat there lonely, with bloodshot eyes, leaning over the ledge, and gazing haggardly towards the scene, when Cora came in. When she was not on the stage he saw nothing. Spaniards and Peruvians, processions and battles, priests and virgins of the sun, went in and out, and had their talk, but Arthur took no note of any one of them; and only saw Cora whom his soul longed after. He said afterwards that he wondered he had not taken a pistol to shoot her, so mad was he in love, and rage, and despair; and had it not been for his mother at home, to whom he did not speak about his luckless condition, but whose silent sympathy and watchfulness greatly comforted the simple half heart-broken fellow, who knows but he might have done something desperate, and have ended his days prematurely in front of

Chatteris gaol? There he sat then, miserable, and gazing at her. And she took no more notice of him than he did of the rest of the house.

"The Fotheringay was uncommonly handsome, in a white raiment and leopard skin, with a sun upon her breast, and fine tawdry bracelets on her beautiful glancing arms. She spouted to admiration the few words of her part, and looked it still better. The eyes, which had overthrown Pen's soul, rolled and gleamed as lustrous as ever; but it was not to him that they were directed that night. He did not know to whom, or remark a couple of gentlemen, in the box next to him, upon whom Miss Fotheringay's glances were perpetually shining.

"Nor had Pen noticed the extraordinary change which had taken place on the stage a short time after the entry of these two gentlemen into the theatre. There were so few people in the house, that the first act of the play languished entirely, and there had been some question of returning the money, as upon that other unfortunate night when poor Pen had been driven away. The actors were perfectly careless about their parts, and yawned through the dialogue, and talked loud to each other in the intervals. Even Bingley was listless, and Mr. B. in Elvira spoke under her breath.

"How came it that all of a sudden Mrs. Bingley began to raise her voice and bellow like a bull of Bashan? Whence was it that Bingley, flinging off his apathy, darted about the stage and yelled like Kean? Why did Garbetts and Rowkins and Miss Rouncy try, each of them, the force of their charms or graces, and act and swagger and scowl and spout their very loudest at the two gentlemen in box No. 3?

"One was a quiet little man in black, with a gray head and a jolly shrewd face—the other was in all respects a splendid and remarkable individual. He was a tall and portly gentleman with a hooked nose and a profusion of curling brown hair and whiskers; his coat was covered with the richest frogs, braiding, and velvet. He had under-waistcoats, many splendid rings, jewelled pins and neck-chains. When he took out his yellow pocket-handkerchief with his hand that was cased in white kids a delightful odour of musk and bergamot was shaken through the house. He was evidently a personage of

rank, and it was at him that the little Chatteris company was acting.

"He was, in a word, no other than Mr. Dolphin, the great manager from London, accompanied by his faithful friend and secretary Mr. William Minns: without whom he never travelled. He had not been ten minutes in the theatre before his august presence there was perceived by Bingley and the rest: and they all began to act their best and try to engage his attention. Even Miss Fotheringay's dull heart, which was disturbed at nothing, felt perhaps a flutter, when she came in presence of the famous London Impresario. She had not much to do in her part, but to look handsome, and stand in picturesque attitudes encircling her child: and she did this work to admiration. In vain the various actors tried to win the favour of the great stage Sultan. Pizarro never got a hand from him. Bingley yelled, and Mrs. Bingley bellowed, and the Manager only took snuff out of his great gold box. It was only in the last scene, when Rolla comes in staggering with the infant (Bingley is not so strong as he was, and his fourth son Master Talma Bingley is a monstrous large child for his age)—when Rolla comes staggering with the child to Cora, who rushes forward with a shriek and says—'O God, there's blood upon him!'—that the London manager clapped his hands, and broke out with an enthusiastic bravo.

"Then having concluded his applause, Mr. Dolphin gave his secretary a slap on the shoulder, and said, 'By Jove, Billy, she'll do!'

"'Who taught her that dodge?' said old Billy, who was a sardonic old gentleman—'I remember her at the Olympic, and hang me if she could say Bo to a goose.'

"It was little Mr. Bows in the orchestra who had taught her the 'dodge' in question. All the company heard the applause, and, as the curtain went down, came round her and congratulated and hated Miss Fotheringay."

CHAPTER XXXV.

"The only inscription on the door-post was 'Cheeryble Brothers.'"

Perhaps no characters in fiction have excited more

pleasurable feelings than the Cheeryble Brothers, who act as a distinct foil to the unpalatable Mr. Squeers and family. It is interesting to know that such genial personages as the Cheerybles had living prototypes—the brothers Grant (Daniel and William), of Ramsbottom and Manchester. There were really four brothers, sons of a farmer, who, being ruined by a flood, afterwards became a herdsman; he and his boys were attracted by the blue-dye works contiguous to the Irwell, and, being naturally thrifty and energetic, soon saved sufficient money to invest in print goods, etc., with which they stocked a small shop in Bury, from which modest beginning they eventually became (by the special help of Sir Robert Peel) owners of extensive works at Ramsbottom, and by their industry, ability, and integrity were regarded as among the best men in their county. A memorial, called "Grants' Stone," marks the spot where the penniless youths rested (like Dick Whittington of old) while taking their first look at the town in which they were afterwards to make themselves a name and a fortune.

Dickens, who for many years possessed an engraved portrait of Daniel Grant, thus wrote to an American friend, Professor Felton, the letter being dated "Niagara Falls, 29th April, 1842": "One of the noble hearts who sat for the Cheeryble Brothers" [William Grant] "is dead. If I had been in England, I would certainly have gone into mourning for the loss of such a glorious life. His brother is not expected to survive him." [He died in 1855.] "I am told that it appears from a memorandum found among the papers of the deceased, that in his lifetime he gave away in charity £600,000, or three million dollars!"

Apropos, a queer advertisement was printed in the London "Times" for February 7, 1844, which read:

"*To the Brothers Cheeryble*, or any who have hearts *like theirs*. A clergyman, who will gladly communicate his name and address, desires to introduce the *case* of a *Gentleman, equal at least to Nickleby* in birth; worthy, *like him*, for refinement of character, even of the best descent; *like him* of spotless integrity, and powerfully beloved by friends who cannot help him; but no longer, *like Nickleby*, sustained by the warm buoyancy of youthful blood. The widowed father of young children, he has spent his all in the struggles of an unsuccessful but honourable business,

and has now for eighteen months been vainly seeking some stipendiary employment. To all who have ever known him he can refer for commendation. Being well versed in accounts, though possessed of education, talents, and experience, which would render him invaluable as a private Secretary, he would accept with gratitude even a clerk's stool with daily bread. Any communication addressed to the Reverend B. C., Post Office, Cambridge, will procure full particulars, ample references, and the introduction of the party, who is now in town and ignorant of this attempt to serve him."

CHAPTER XLI.

"Ever since her last momentous conversation with her son, Mrs. Nickleby had begun to display unusual care in the adornment of her person."

The portrait of Mrs. Nickleby was based upon the personality of the novelist's mother. In a letter to Mr. R. J. Lane, A.R.A., 1844, Dickens said, apropos of some people who looked upon certain of his characters as grotesque impossibilities: "Mrs. Nickleby herself, sitting bodily before me in a solid chair, once asked me whether I really believed there ever was such a woman!" Before Dickens had written this chapter of the romantic attachment between Mrs. Nickleby and the gentleman in the small clothes, he wrote to Forster: "I think Mrs. Nickleby's love-scene will come out rather unique."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"It was upon the whole a very distinguished party."

The intended conclusion of "Nicholas Nickleby" was anticipated by the dramatists, and Dickens, naturally annoyed by this proceeding, was compelled to alter the termination of his story. In the succeeding number he dropped down heavily on these dramatic pirates, by introducing his hero in conversation with a "literary gentleman" (intended as a portrait of W. T. Moncrieff), who, after expressing an opinion that it advances the fame

of an author to have his work dramatised by him, is subjected by Nicholas to a wholesome tirade against the malpractices indulged in by members of his particular craft. A French playwright also adapted it for the Parisian stage, and its performance was witnessed by Thackeray, who wrote an amusing account thereof in "Fraser's Magazine," March, 1842. The following is an excerpt from that article, called "Dickens in France":

"Seeing placarded on the walls a huge announcement that 'Nicholas Nickleby, ou les Voleurs de Londres' was to be performed at the Ambigu-Comique Théâtre on the Boulevard, and having read in the 'Journal des Débats' a most stern and ferocious criticism upon the piece in question, and upon poor Monsieur Dickens, its supposed author, it seemed to me by no means unprofitable to lay out fifty sous in the purchase of a stall at the theatre, and to judge with my own eyes of the merits and demerits of the play.

"Who does not remember (except those who never saw the drama, and therefore of course cannot be expected to have any notion of it)—who does not, I say, remember the pathetic acting of Mrs. Keeley in the part of Smike, as performed at the Adelphi; the obstinate good humour of Mr. Wilkinson, who, having to represent the brutal Squeers, was, according to his nature, so chuckling, oily, and kind-hearted, that little boys must have thought it a good joke to be flogged by him; finally, the acting of the admirable Yates in the kindred part of Mantalini? Can France, I thought, produce a fop equal to Yates? Is there any vulgarity and assurance on the Boulevard that can be compared to that of which, in the character of Mantalini, he gives a copy so wonderfully close to nature? Never then were fifty sous more cheerfully—nay, eagerly paid, than by your obedient servant.

"After China, this is the most ignorant country, thought I, in the whole civilized world (the company was dropping into the theatre, and the musicians were one by one taking their seats); these people are so immensely conceited, that they think the rest of Europe beneath them; and though they have invaded Spain, Italy, Russia. Germany, not one in ten thousand can ask for a piece of bread in the national language of the countries so conquered. But see the force of genius; after a time it con-

quers everything, even the ignorance and conceit of Frenchmen! The name of Nicholas Nickleby crosses the Channel in spite of them. I shall see honest John Browdie and wicked Ralph once more, honest and wicked in French. Shall we have the Kenwigses, and their uncle, the delightful collector; and will he, in Portsmouth Church, make that famous marriage with Henrietta Petowker? Above all what will *Mrs.* Nickleby say?—the famous Mrs. Nickleby, who has lain undescribed until Boz seized upon her and brought that great truth to light, and whom yet every man possesses in the bosom of his own family. Are there Mrs. Nicklebies—or, to speak more correctly, are there Mistresses Nickleby in France? We shall see all this at the rising of the curtain; and, hark! the fiddlers are striking up.

"Presently the prompter gives his three heart-thrilling slaps, and the great painted cloth moves upwards: it is always a moment of awe and pleasure. What is coming? First you get a glimpse of legs and feet; then suddenly the owners of the limbs in question in steady attitudes, looking as if they had been there one thousand years before; now behold the landscape, the clouds; the great curtain vanishes altogether, the charm is dissolved, and the disenchanted performers begin."

[A satirical detailed description of the five acts of the play follows.]

"The musicians have hurried off long before this. In one instant the stage lamps go out, and you see fellows starting forward to cover the boxes with canvas. Up goes the chandelier amongst the gods and goddesses painted on the ceiling. Those in the galleries, meanwhile, bellow out 'Saint Ernest!' he it is who acted John Browdie. Then there is a yell of 'Smeek! Smeek!' Blushing and bowing, Madame Prosper comes forward; by Heavens! a pretty woman, with tender eyes and a fresh, clear voice. Next the gods call for 'Chilly!' who acted the villain: but by this time you are bustling and struggling amongst the crowd in the lobbies, where there is the usual odour of garlic and tobacco. Men in sabots come tumbling down from the galleries; cries of '*Auguste, Solo! Eugénie! prends ton parapluie*,' '*Monsieur, vous me marchez sur les pieds*,' are heard in the crowd, over which the brazen helmets of the Pompier's tower are shining." . . .

"As for the worthy Boz, *his* share in the piece is perfectly insignificant, and that he has no more connection with the noble geniuses who invented the drama than a pig has with a gold-laced hat that a nobleman may have hung on it, or a starting-post on the race-course with some magnificent thousand-guinea fiery horses who may choose to run from it. How poor do his writings appear after those of the Frenchman! How feeble, mean, and destitute of imagination! *He* never would have thought of introducing six lords, an ex-kidnapper, a great banker, an idiot, a schoolmaster, his usher, a cattle-driver, coming for the most part a couple of hundred miles, in order to lay open all their secrets in the coffee-room of the King's Arms hotel! He never could have invented the great subterraneous cavern, *cimetière et salle de bal*, as Jules Janin calls it! The credit of all this falls upon the French adaptors of Monsieur Dickens's romance; and so it will be advisable to let the public know."

CHAPTER LV.

"Jane Dibabs—the Dibabses lived in the beautiful little thatched white house one story high."

There is no doubt that this description of the Dibabs's cottage corresponded with that of the tenement which Dickens, in 1839, rented for his parents in the county of Devonshire. In a letter to Thomas Mitton, he said of the place: "The situation is charming; meadows in the front, an orchard running parallel to the garden hedge, richly-wooded hills closing in the prospect behind, and, away to the left, before a splendid view of the hill on which Exeter is situated, the Cathedral towers rising up into the sky in the most picturesque manner possible. I don't think I ever saw so cheerful and pleasant a spot."

"Smike became alarmingly ill."

Poor Smike was the first of those pathetic pictures, drawn by Dickens, that awoke the world to compassion for the helplessness of the young in an environment where cruelty, ignorance, and neglect were predominant. Numerous letters were written by sympathetic young ladies to the creator of Smike imploring him to spare this

character from death. Such public appeal was analogous to the flood of letters sent Richardson to "save Lovelace's soul alive" when he was writing "Clarissa Harlowe."

CHAPTER LXV.

"The grass was green above the dead boy's grave."

This last paragraph has been frequently pointed out as a sample of Dickens's much-discussed metrical prose, into which he was wont to break whenever the subject touched his feelings or excited his imagination. When he had concluded his labours on the novel, 20th of September, 1839, he wrote in his private Diary: "Finished Nickleby this day at two o'clock, and went over to Ramsgate with Fred and Kate, to send the last little chapter to Bradbury and Evans. Thank God that I have lived to get through it happily."

THE END

HARD TIMES

INTRODUCTION, ETC.

INTRODUCTION.

I HAVE heard that in some debating clubs there is a rule that the members may discuss anything except religion and politics. I cannot imagine what they do discuss; but it is quite evident that they have ruled out the only two subjects which are either important or amusing. The thing is a part of a certain modern tendency to avoid things because they lead to warmth; whereas, obviously, we ought, even in a social sense, to seek those things specially. The warmth of the discussion is as much a part of hospitality as the warmth of the fire. And it is singularly suggestive that in English literature the two things have died together. The very people who would blame Dickens for his sentimental hospitality are the very people who would also blame him for his narrow political conviction. The very people who would blame him for his narrow radicalism are those who would blame him for his broad fireside. Real conviction and real charity are much nearer than people suppose. Dickens was capable of loving all men; but he refused to love all opinions. The modern humanitarian can love all opinions, but he cannot love all men; he seems, sometimes, in the ecstasy of his humanitarianism, even to hate them all. He can love all opinions, including the opinion that men are unlovable.

In feeling Dickens as a lover we must never forget him as a fighter, and a fighter for a creed: but indeed there is no other kind of fighter. The geniality which he spread over all his creations was geniality spread from one centre, from one flaming peak. He was willing to excuse Mr. Micawber for being extravagant; but Dickens and Dickens's doctrine were strictly to decide how far he was to be excused. He was willing to like Mr. Twemlow in spite of his snobbishness, but Dickens and Dickens's doctrine were alone to be judges of how far he was snobbish.

There was never a more didactic writer: hence there was never one more amusing. He had no mean modern notion of keeping the moral doubtful. He would have regarded this as a mere piece of slovenliness, like leaving the last page illegible.

Everywhere in Dickens's work these angles of his absolute opinion stood up out of the confusion of his general kindness, just as sharp and splintered peaks stand up out of the soft confusion of the forests. Dickens is always generous, he is generally kind-hearted, he is often sentimental, he is sometimes intolerably maudlin; but you never know when you will not come upon one of the convictions of Dickens; and when you do come upon it you do know it. It is as hard and as high as any precipice or peak of the mountains. The highest and hardest of these peaks is "Hard Times."

It is here more than anywhere else that the sternness of Dickens emerges as separate from his softness; it is here, most obviously, so to speak, that his bones stick out. There are indeed many other books of his which are written better and written in a sadder tone. "Great Expectations" is melancholy in a sense; but it is doubtful of everything, even of its own melancholy. The "Tale of Two Cities" is a great tragedy, but it is still a sentimental tragedy. It is a great drama, but it is still a melodrama. But this tale of "Hard Times" is in some way harsher than all these. For it is the expression of a righteous indignation which cannot condescend to humour and which cannot even condescend to pathos. Twenty times we have taken Dickens's hand and it has been sometimes hot with revelry and sometimes weak with weariness; but this time we start a little, for it is inhumanly cold; and then we realise that we have touched his gauntlet of steel.

One cannot express the real value of this book without being irrelevant. It is true that one cannot express the real value of anything without being irrelevant. If we take a thing frivolously we can take it separately, but the moment we take a thing seriously, if it were only an old umbrella, it is obvious that that umbrella opens above us into the immensity of the whole universe. But there are rather particular reasons why the value of the book called "Hard Times" should be referred back to great historic

and theoretic matters with which it may appear superficially to have little or nothing to do. The chief reason can perhaps be stated thus—that English politics had for more than a hundred years been getting into more and more of a hopeless tangle (a tangle which, of course, has since become even worse), and that Dickens did in some extraordinary way see what was wrong, even if he did not see what was right.

The Liberalism which Dickens and nearly all of his contemporaries professed had begun in the American and the French revolutions. Almost all modern English criticism upon those revolutions has been vitiated by the assumption that those revolutions burst upon a world which was unprepared for their ideas—a world ignorant of the possibility of such ideas. Somewhat the same mistake is made by those who suggest that Christianity was adopted by a world incapable of criticising it; whereas obviously it was adopted by a world that was tired of criticising everything. The vital mistake that is made about the French Revolution is merely this—that every one talks about it as the introduction of a new idea. It was not the introduction of a new idea; there are no new ideas. Or if there are new ideas, they would not cause the least irritation if they were introduced into political society; because the world having never got used to them there would be no mass of men ready to fight for them at a moment's notice. That which was irritating about the French Revolution was this—that it was not the introduction of a new ideal, but the practical fulfilment of an old one. From the time of the first fairy tales men had always believed ideally in equality; they had always thought that something ought to be done, if anything could be done to redress the balance between Cinderella and the ugly sisters. The irritating thing about the French was not that they said this ought to be done; everybody said that. The irritating thing about the French was that they did it. They proposed to carry out into a positive scheme what had been the vision of humanity; and humanity was naturally annoyed. The kings of Europe did not make war upon the Revolution because it was a blasphemy, but because it was a copy-book maxim which had been just too accurately copied. It was a platitude which they had always held in theory

unexpectedly put into practice. The tyrants did not hate democracy because it was a paradox; they hated it because it was a truism which seemed in some danger of coming true.

Now it happens to be hugely important to have this right view of the Revolution in considering its political effects upon England. For the English, being a deeply and indeed excessively romantic people, could never be quite content with this quality of cold and bald obviousness about the republican formula. The republican formula was merely this—that the state must consist of its citizens ruling equally, however unequally they may do anything else. In their capacity of members of the state they are all equally interested in its preservation. But the English soon began to be romantically restless about this eternal truism; they were perpetually trying to turn it into something else, into something more picturesque—progress perhaps, or anarchy. At last they turned it into the highly exciting and highly unsound system of politics, which was known as the Manchester School, and which was expressed with a sort of logical flightiness, more excusable in literature, by Mr. Herbert Spencer. Of course Danton or Washington or any of the original republicans would have thought these people were mad; they would never have admitted for a moment that the state must not interfere with commerce or competition; they would merely have insisted that if the state did interfere, it must really be the state—that is, the whole people. But the distance between the common sense of Danton and the mere ecstasy of Herbert Spencer marks the English way of colouring and altering the revolutionary idea. The English people as a body went blind, as the saying is, for interpreting democracy entirely in terms of liberty. They said in substance that if they had more and more liberty it did not matter whether they had any equality or any fraternity. But this was violating the sacred trinity of true politics; they confounded the persons and they divided the substance.

Now the really odd thing about England in the nineteenth century is this—that there was one Englishman who happened to keep his head. The men who lost their heads lost highly scientific and philosophical heads; they were great cosmic systematisers like Spencer, great social

philosophers like Bentham, great practical politicians like Bright, great political economists like Mill. The man who kept his head kept a head full of fantastic nonsense; he was a writer of rowdy farces, a demagogue of fiction, a man without education in any serious sense whatever, a man whose whole business was to turn ordinary cockneys into extraordinary caricatures. Yet when all these other children of the Revolution went wrong he, by a mystical something in his bones, went right. He knew nothing of the Revolution; yet he struck the note of it. He returned to the original sentimental commonplace upon which it is forever founded, as the Church is founded on a rock. In an England gone mad about a minor theory he reasserted the original idea—the idea that no one in the state must be too weak to influence the state.

This man was Dickens. He did this work much more genuinely than it was done by Carlyle or Ruskin; for they were simply Tories making out a romantic case for the return of Toryism. But Dickens was a real Liberal demanding the return of real Liberalism. Dickens was there to remind people that England had rubbed out two words of the revolutionary motto, had left only Liberty and destroyed Equality and Fraternity. In this book, "Hard Times" he specially champions equality. In all his books he champions fraternity.

The atmosphere of this book and what it stands for can be very adequately conveyed in the note on the book by Lord Macaulay, who may stand as a very good example of the spirit of England in those years of eager emancipation and expanding wealth—the years in which Liberalism was turned from an omnipotent truth to a weak scientific system. Macaulay's private comment on "Hard Times" runs, "One or two passages of exquisite pathos and the rest sullen Socialism." That is not an unfair and certainly not a specially hostile criticism, but it exactly shows how the book struck those people who were mad on political liberty and dead about everything else. Macaulay mistook for a new formula called Socialism what was, in truth, only the old formula called political democracy. He and his Whigs had so thoroughly mauled and modified the original idea of Rousseau or Jefferson that when they saw it again they positively thought that it was something quite new and eccentric. But the truth was

that Dickens was not a Socialist, but an unspoilt Liberal; he was not sullen; nay, rather, he had remained strangely hopeful. They called him a sullen Socialist only to disguise their astonishment at finding still loose about the London streets a happy republican.

Dickens is the one living link between the old kindness and the new, between the good will of the past and the good works of the future. He links May Day with Bank Holiday, and he does it almost alone. All the men around him, great and good as they were, were in comparison puritanical, and never so puritanical as when they were also atheistic. He is a sort of solitary pipe down which pours to the twentieth century the original river of Merry England. And although this "Hard Times" is, as its name implies, the hardest of his works, although there is less in it perhaps than in any of the others of the *abandon* and the buffoonery of Dickens, this only emphasises the more clearly the fact that he stood almost alone for a more humane and hilarious view of democracy. None of his great and much more highly educated contemporaries could help him in this. Carlyle was as gloomy on the one side as Herbert Spencer on the other. He protested against the commercial oppression simply and solely because it was not only an oppression but a depression. And this protest of his was made specially in the case of the book before us. It may be bitter, but it was a protest against bitterness. It may be dark, but it is the darkness of the subject and not of the author. He is by his own account dealing with hard times, but not with a hard eternity, not with a hard philosophy of the universe. Nevertheless, this is the one place in his work where he does not make us remember human happiness by example as well as by precept. This is, as I have said, not the saddest, but certainly the harshest of his stories. It is perhaps the only place where Dickens, in defending happiness, for a moment forgets to be happy.

He describes Bounderby and Gradgrind with a degree of grimness and sombre hatred very different from the half-affectionate derision which he directed against the old tyrants or humbugs of the earlier nineteenth century —the pompous Dedlock or the fatuous Nupkins, the grotesque Bumble or the inane Tigg. In those old books his very abuse was benignant; in "Hard Times" even his

sympathy is hard. And the reason is again to be found in the political facts of the century. Dickens could be half genial with the older generation of oppressors because it was a dying generation. It was evident, or at least it seemed evident then, that Nupkins could not go on much longer making up the law of England to suit himself; that Sir Leicester Dedlock could not go on much longer being kind to his tenants as if they were dogs and cats. And some of these evils the nineteenth century did really eliminate or improve. For the first half of the century Dickens and all his friends were justified in feeling that the chains were falling from mankind. At any rate, the chains did fall from Mr. Rouncewell the Iron-master. And when they fell from him he picked them up and put them upon the poor.

GILBERT K. CHESTERTON.

CRITICAL COMMENTS.

I.

THE essential value and truth of Dickens's writings have been unwisely lost sight of by many thoughtful persons, merely because he presents his truth with some colour of caricature. Unwisely, because Dickens's caricature, though often gross, is never mistaken. Allowing for his manner of telling them, the things he tells us are always true. I wish that he could think it right to limit his brilliant exaggeration to works written only for public amusement; and when he takes up a subject of high national importance, such as that which he handled in "Hard Times," that he would use severer and more accurate analysis. The usefulness of that work (to my mind, in several respects, the greatest he has written) is with many persons seriously diminished because Mr. Bounderby is a dramatic monster, instead of a characteristic example of a worldly master; and Stephen Blackpool a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman. But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially "Hard Times," should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions. They will find much that is partial, and because partial, apparently unjust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all their trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told.

JOHN RUSKIN: *Unto This Last.*

II.

. . . The next tale was of slighter character, and shorter than the preceding ones—"Hard Times"; a strange disjointed kind of story, showing in the earlier chapters how an education addressed wholly to the head, will never produce a beneficial effect on the heart, but rather encourage intense selfishness. This is obvious enough; but we cannot see why a travelling company of actors, poor and uneducated, living "from hand to mouth," should be able to give so much better instruction to the poor girl whose father is clown, that she should become the model heroine of the story. We are not surprised that the description of Coketown and its inhabitants should have awakened so much indignation in the manufacturing districts. . . . Mr. Gradgrind, a very monomaniac on statistics; Bounderby, the millionaire banker, who pensions off his respectable mother, and boasts in every company that he was born in a ditch! Bitzer, the mean, grasping porter, and worthless Tom Gradgrind. One of the best characters, though she is far from pleasant, is Mrs. Sparsit, the reduced gentlewoman, the exclusive of the country town, with proud humility receiving presents from the *parvenu* banker, and comforting herself that her "husband was a Powler." The work-people do not awaken any great interest; poor Stephen and his faithful friend who was to have been his wife, are drawn with sad truth; but "short time," and a drunken, profligate wife, who persists in tormenting him, are troubles quite as likely to occur to a London mechanic as to a Coketown operative. On the whole, on laying down this very disjointed story, we are inclined to take the poor operative's last words as its appropriate motto, "Aw a muddle."

British Quarterly Review: *February*, 1862.

III.

It is ridiculous to assert, as Ruskin asserts, that "Hard Times" is Dickens's greatest work; for it is *the* one of all his works which should be distinguished from the others

as specially wanting in that power of real characterisation on which his reputation as a vivid delineator of human character and human life depends. The whole effect of the story, though it lacks neither amusing nor pathetic incidents, and though it contains passages of description which rank with his best efforts in combining truth of fact with truth of imagination, is ungenial and unpleasant. Indeed, in this book, he simply intensified popular discontent; he ignored or he was ignorant of those laws the violation of which is at the root of popular discontent; and proclaimed with his favourite ideal workman, Stephen Blackpool, that not only the relation between employers and employed, but the whole constitution of civilised society itself, was a hopeless "muddle," beyond the reach of human intelligence or humane feeling to explain and justify. It is to be observed here that all cheering views of the amelioration of the condition of the race come from those hard thinkers whose benevolent impulses push them to the investigation of natural and economic laws. Starting from the position of sentimental benevolence, and meeting unforeseen intellectual obstacles at every step in his progress, Dickens ends "in a muddle" by the necessity of his method. Had he been intellectually equipped with the knowledge possessed by many men to whom in respect to genius he was immensely superior, he would never have landed in a conclusion so ignominious, and one which the average intellect of well-informed persons of the present day contemptuously rejects.

EDWIN P. WHIPPLE: *in the "Atlantic Monthly," March*, 1877.

IV.

WRITING at the end of January to Charles Knight apparently in reply to some strictures from that friend, Dickens said of the story ["Hard Times"] which he had begun:

"My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else—the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time—the men who, through long years to come, will do more to damage the

real, useful truths of political economy than I could do (if I tried) in my whole life; the addled heads who would take the average of cold in the Crimea during twelve months as a reason for clothing a soldier in nankeens on a night when he would be frozen to death in fur, and who would comfort the labourer in travelling twelve miles a day to and from his work by telling him that the average distance of one inhabited place from another in the whole area of England, is not more than four miles."

To the same correspondent he reverted to this subject six weeks later, when returning him an article which he had read, and on which he had made some notes:

"I earnestly entreat your attention to the point (I have been working upon it, weeks past, in 'Hard Times') which I have jocosely suggested on the last page but one. The English are, so far as I know, the hardest worked people on whom the sun shines. Be content if, in their wretched intervals of pleasure, they read for amusement and do no worse. They are born at the oar, and they live and die at it."

The second sentence of this passage is in almost the same words as the opening sentence of the tenth chapter of the story itself.

"Hard Times" began in "Household Words" for April 1, 1854, and at first all went smoothly, the author having prepared several instalments in advance. After a few weeks, however, the old troubles arose and he was complaining: "The difficulty of the space is *crushing*. Nobody can have an idea of it who has not had an experience of patient fiction writing with some elbow room always, and open places in perspective." The difficulties, however, were not insuperable, and when the story was completed, as it was at Boulogne in the middle of July, Charles Dickens had the gratification of knowing that he had doubled the circulation of "Household Words" and had produced a characteristic story. On its completion as a serial, in the middle of August, 1854, "Hard Times" was published in volume form with a dedication to Thomas Carlyle.

When he began the story Dickens was desirous of seeing a strike in a manufacturing town, and therefore visited Preston, where a big strike was in progress. His letters show him to have been disappointed: "I am afraid I

shall not be able to get much here. Except the crowds at the street-corners reading the placards pro and con; and the cold absence of smoke from the mill-chimneys; there is very little in the streets to make the town remarkable. I am told that the people 'sit at home and mope.' The delegates with the money from the neighbouring places come in to-day to report the amounts they bring; and to-morrow the people are paid. When I have seen both these ceremonies, I shall return."

WALTER JERROLD: *Note on "Hard Times."*

V.

SUCCESSFUL as the story was, both in "Household Words" and in volume form, its strong advocacy of the "working-man" side of the question, and its absolute refusal to recognise any good thing in the master's case, or anything but harshness and cold-blooded cruelty in the teachings of political economy, naturally found for it a good many enemies. The old-fashioned Tory views of "Blackwood's Magazine" no doubt influenced the criticism of a writer in its issue of April, 1855, who laid down the law in the following uncompromising style: "The book is more palpably a *made* book than any of the manufactured articles we have lately seen. It is neither born out of the natural fruition of a mind and fancy always astir—nor, after it has begun to be, do its characters and events proceed with the natural compulsion and impulse of life." Harriet Martineau, who may be accepted as a typical representative of the scientific political economists, complained that "another vexation is his vigorous erroneousness about matters of science, as shown in 'Oliver Twist' about the new Poor law (which he confounds with the abrogated old one) and in 'Hard Times,' about the controversies of employers." The cold Whiggery of Lord Macaulay, with its veneer of Liberalism and its real deep-rooted distrust of the people, found characteristic vent in this little sneer: "I read Dickens's 'Hard Times.' One excessively touching, heart-breaking passage, and the rest sullen socialism. The evils he attacks he caricatures grossly, and with little humour."

On the other hand, Mr. Ruskin, in a foot-note to "The

Roots of Honour," the first of the essays which were published in 1862 under the title "Unto this Last," took a very different view of the matter—a view which was possibly as much tinged by his sympathies with the objects which Charles Dickens had before him, as the criticism of the other writers I have quoted were influenced by their antagonism to them.*

As I have already said, the progress of "Hard Times" was uneventful enough, but, notwithstanding this, the work on the story "took it out" of its author considerably, if we may judge from the following extract from a letter to the Hon. Mrs. Richard Watson, dated the 1st of November, 1854: "Why I found myself so used-up after 'Hard Times' I scarcely know, perhaps because I intended to do nothing in that way for a year, when the idea laid hold of me by the throat in a very violent manner, and because the compression and close condensation necessary for that disjointed form of publication gave me perpetual trouble. But I really was tired, which is a result so very incomprehensible that I can't forget it."

CHARLES DICKENS THE YOUNGER: *Introduction to "Hard Times."*

VI.

I AM acquainted with a publisher, an excellent man, who used to keep a long printed list of titles at large for novels, just as they came into his head: he then offered authors their choice. Dickens had fourteen possible names for "Hard Times." Mr. Forster made "a short leet," as the Scots say, of three; one of the three also occurred in Dickens's own "short leet," and that one was "Hard Times." "According to Cocker" was rejected.

One of Dickens's purposes was achieved, as Mr. Forster says. "He more than doubled the circulation of his journal." For the rest, "he wrote a story which, though not among his best, contains things as characteristic as any he has written." Mr. Forster, not much in sympathy with "Hard Times," cites the eulogy, an admirable criticism, of Mr. Ruskin. In 1854 the public still thought machinery a noble thing, and Political Economy was not

*See I. *ante*.—ED.

yet bankrupt. We must perhaps protest that Political Economy has been rather hardly treated. It is represented as holding that the laws of the mart are things holy and lovely in themselves, whereas a mathematician might as well be accused of finding a fascinating charm in "the hard-grained Muses of the cube and square." Angles and circles will undeniably comport themselves in a given way, though the spirit of romance would revel in an occasional vagary—as if, for instance, two straight lines would unbend, and enclose a space. In the same way Political Economy is an exact science. If you introduce the methods of "Carol philosophy," as Dickens desired, the rules will go on pitilessly working; but that is not the fault of Political Economy. The fault lies with the mere existence of trade, which the Greek philosophers, therefore, looked on as exceedingly low, and would not admit into their ideal states. Dickens did not go to this logical length; he only insisted that manufactures, and machinery, and Mr. Bounderby, were unlovely things, which is not deniable. He dealt a vigorous blow at the odious "self-made man" whose boasts, as hath been said, "relieve his Maker of a great responsibility." Yet the Cheerybles were "self-made;" so, on the whole, the balance is not unfairly held by Dickens.

It is curious to note, that his ideas about the need of recreation, the need of fancy, were the ideas of an institution which he greatly disliked, the Catholic Church. Under the Church England was Merry England, and it has never been Merry England since Puritanism came in, with a brief and not laudable interval that dated from a certain Twenty-Ninth of May. Popular holidays, contempt of "Facts," appeals to fancy,—all these were of the policy of the Church, and were dear to Dickens, himself so Protestant, and so contemptuous of the Middle Ages. Such are the inconsistencies of "Carol philosophy." "I wish," said Mr. Ruskin, "that he could think it right to limit his brilliant exaggeration to works written only for public amusement; and when he takes up a subject of high national importance, such as that which he handled in 'Hard Times,' that he would use severer and more accurate analysis." This, I think, merely means that a novel is one thing, and that a treatise on a topic of high national importance is another thing. But,

thanks probably to education, the public will not read a treatise; they will only read novels. Be the subject social statics, or Biblical criticism, or the wicked impurity of matrimony, or be it as important and abstruse as you please, our highly educated public will study it in a novel, or not at all. Now, a novel is not a vehicle for "severe and accurate analysis." A novel is essentially emotional. The public, therefore, quite unlike Mr. Gradgrind, prefers to receive facts and logic surrounded by a halo of emotion. Therefore we have novels with a purpose, and it is through them that the reading world prefers to be educated. I cannot agree with Mr. Gradgrind's aversion to fancy, while I sympathise with his passion for facts. The better course appears to be to take our facts apart from the novelist's fancies, and not to mix his fancies with our facts. Mr. Bounderby, says Mr. Ruskin, is "a dramatic monster." But Mr. Bounderby is really very close to actual fact. Stephen Blackpool is more idealised than Mr. Bounderby is caricatured. His case, when he wants a legal separation, is the hardest of cases. But what he really desires is a divorce, on the score of dipsomania in his wife. He wants to marry Rachael. Now, it would not be fair to regard this as exclusively a poor man's grievance. A duke or a duchess, with an intemperate consort, cannot divorce that consort, and wed somebody else, however beautiful and virtuous, because the consort drinks. The rich, even in such a case, have alleviations of a lot which is hard even on the rich. But a divorce and a new marriage they cannot get. Perhaps a divorce ought to be obtainable, but the grievance, for once, does not fall on the poor alone.

ANDREW LANG.

VII.

IN comparison with most of Dickens's novels, "Hard Times" is contained within a narrow compass; and this with the further necessity of securing to each successive small portion of the story a certain immediate degree of effectiveness, accounts, in some measure, for the peculiarity of the impression left by this story upon many of its readers. Short as the story relatively is, few of Dickens's

fictions were elaborated with so much care. He had not intended to write a new story for a twelvemonth, when, as he says, "the idea laid hold of him by the throat in a very violent manner," and the labour, carried on under conditions of peculiar irksomeness, "used him up," after a quite unaccustomed fashion. The book thus acquired a precision of form and manner which commends it to the French school of criticism rather than to lovers of English humour in its ampler forms and more flowing moods. At the same time, the work has its purpose so visibly imprinted on its front, as almost to forbid our regarding it in the first instance apart from the moral which avowedly it is intended to inculcate. This moral, by no means new with Dickens, has both a negative and a positive side. "Do not harden your hearts," is the negative injunction, more especially do not harden them against the promptings of that human kindness which should draw together man and man, old and young, rich and poor; and keep your sympathies fresh by bringing nourishment to them through channels which prejudice or short-sightedness would fain narrow or stop up. . . .

Apart, however, from the didactic purposes which overburden it, the pathos and humour of particular portions of this tale appear to me to have been in nowise overrated. The domestic tragedy of Stephen and Rachael has a subdued intensity of tenderness and melancholy of a kind rare with Dickens, upon whom the example of Mrs. Gaskell in this instance may not have been without its influence. Nor is there anything more delicately and at the same time more appropriately conceived in any of his works, than poor Rachael's dominion over the imagination as well as over the affections of her noble-minded and unfortunate lover: "as the shining stars were to the heavy candle in the window, so was Rachael, in the rugged fancy of this man, to the common experiences of his life." The love-story of poor Louisa is of a different kind, and more wordy in the telling; yet here also the feelings painted are natural and true. The humorous interest is almost entirely concentrated upon the company of horse-riders; and never has Dickens's extraordinary power of humorous observation more genially asserted itself.

ADOLPHUS WILLIAM WARD: *Dickens.*

ARGUMENT.

"Hard Times," one of Dickens's shorter novels, and noteworthy as containing fewer characters than any other, is a sermon against the oppression of Fancy by Fact, and against the grinding life of factory workers.

Thomas Gradgrind is "a man of realities, a man of facts and calculations," who has smothered a naturally tender heart under a merciless system of education. This system he has advocated in the schools and practised in his own home. His children have not been allowed to use their imaginations, or indulge in sentiment, their whole existence being regulated by "Facts." The two oldest children, Louisa, aged about fifteen years when the story opens, and Tom, slightly younger, are models of machine-made education, though really of stunted personality. A ray of interest enters the home when Cecilia Jupe, called "Sissy," the child of a circus performer, is befriended by Gradgrind, who wishes to try his system upon her. While Sissy does not learn much under the system, her quiet, loving nature makes her a favourite in the household.

Gradgrind's most intimate friend is Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, a bully of humility, who delights to tell how he rose from the gutter to become owner of Coketown's mills. Bounderby's admiration for Louisa Gradgrind has been of long standing, although she shrinks from his rough manners.

Four or five years elapse, and young Tom Gradgrind, now well grown, is given a position in Bounderby's Bank. Tom has developed into a "whelp" of deceit and selfishness, yet is the sole object of Louisa's starved affections. For his sake she accepts Bounderby, when a proposal of marriage is made, and enters uncomplainingly into the manufacturer's dreary home. Tom at once makes use of

this situation to borrow money from his sister, and to shirk his duties.

After a year of uncongenial married life, Louisa becomes acquainted with James Harthouse, a careless man of the world sent on a political mission to Coketown. Harthouse is suave, polished, and keen of scent. He quickly discovers the situation above outlined, and establishes himself in Louisa's regard—although she is unusually repressed—by pretending an interest in Tom. This young "whelp" has gone from bad to worse, adding gambling and defalcation to his other sins. He finally covers up a bank shortage by pretending that a robbery has been committed, and directing suspicion against Stephen Blackpool, a mill employee who has recently been discharged. Blackpool had refused to join a union of his fellow-workers, and his blunt, honest speech had angered the blustering Bounderby; hence his discharge. As he has disappeared from the town, Tom's plot of suspicion works admirably. Louisa, however, suspects the truth, to her inward anguish. And Rachael, Stephen's steadfast friend, starts to work to clear his name.

Mrs. Sparsit, who has been Bounderby's housekeeper and an aspirant for his hand, is greatly chagrined when he weds Louisa. She works assiduouly to undermine the latter's reputation and ingratiate herself with Bounderby. She is secretly delighted, therefore, with Harthouse's pursuit of Louisa, which has become more and more assiduous. She finally overhears the pair agree to secret elopement, and she hastens to the husband with the tale. Louisa, however, does not keep the appointment, but instead goes to her father and tells him the whole story of her wrecked, loveless life. Gradgrind realises, too late, the fatal flaw in his system of "Fact."

The alarmed Bounderby goes to acquaint Gradgrind with Louisa's flight, only to find her under her father's roof. Husband and wife part, and Louisa remains there, being cared for and awakened into something like affectionate life by the devoted Sissy. The latter also induces Harthouse to leave the neighbourhood, and the dangerous incident is closed.

Bounderby turns to the hunt for the bank robber with renewed vigour. Rachael, who alone knows Stephen's whereabouts, writes him to return. Nothing is heard

from him for some days, then Rachael and Sissy find that he has fallen down an abandoned shaft. He is rescued, and, dying, gives Gradgrind an inkling of the truth. The latter follows Tom—who has decamped upon the discovery of Stephen—to a place near Liverpool, and secures his escape to foreign parts, where Tom later dies.

Mrs. Sparsit's machinations receive a final defeat when she unearths Bounderby's mother, a simple soul who gives the true facts in the case of that self-made man's career.

Some five years later, Bounderby dies in a fit on the Coketown street. Louisa, however, never marries again. Gradgrind retains the seat which he has secured in Parliament, but tries henceforth to tincture his politics and life with "Faith, Hope, and Charity."

J. Walker McSpadden: *Synopses of Dickens's Novels.*

CHARACTERS.

BITZER, a well-crammed pupil in Mr. Gradgrind's model school.
STEPHEN BLACKPOOL, weaver in Bounderby's mill.
MRS. BLACKPOOL, his wife, an outcast.
JOSIAH BOUNDERBY, a self-made man and wealthy Coketown manufacturer.
MRS. LOUISA BOUNDERBY, *née* Gradgrind, his wife.
MR. E. W. B. CHILDERS, a member of Sleary's Circus Troupe.
EMMA GORDON, a member of Sleary's Circus Troupe.
THOMAS GRADGRIND, a man of "Facts."
MRS. GRADGRIND, his wife.
LOUISA GRADGRIND, his daughter, afterwards Mrs. Bounderby.
THOMAS GRADGRIND, his son, a selfish, cross-grained whelp.
ADAM SMITH, MALTHUS, and JANE, other children of Thomas Gradgrind.
MR. JAMES HARTHOUSE, a dilettante adventurer.
CECILIA JUPE ("Sissy"), a child of the circus.
KIDDERMINSTER, performer in Sleary's circus.
MR. M'CHOAKUMCHILD, teacher in Mr. Gradgrind's model school.
MRS. PEGLER, mother to Bounderby.
RACHAEL, employee in Bounderby's mill.
SLACKBRIDGE, a trades-union agitator.
MR. SLEARY, proprietor of a circus.
JOSEPHINE SLEARY, his daughter.
MRS. SPARSIT, a highly connected elderly lady; housekeeper to Bounderby.

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HARD TIMES.

BOOK THE FIRST.—SOWING.

CHAPTER I.

THE ONE THING NEEDFUL.

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasised his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders,—nay, his very neckcloth, trained

to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was,—all helped the emphasis.

"In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!"

The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

CHAPTER II.

MURDERING THE INNOCENTS.

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir—peremptorily Thomas—Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. You might hope to get some other nonsensical belief into the head of George Gradgrind, or Augustus Gradgrind, or John Gradgrind, or Joseph Gradgrind (all suppositious, non-existent persons), but into the head of Thomas Gradgrind—no, sir!

In such terms Mr. Gradgrind always mentally introduced himself, whether to his private circle of acquaintance, or to the public in general. In such terms, no doubt, substituting the words "boys and girls," for "sir," Thomas Gradgrind now presented Thomas Gradgrind to the little pitchers before him, who were to be filled so full of facts.

Indeed, as he eagerly sparkled at them from the cellarage before mentioned, he seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge. He seemed a galvanising apparatus, too, charged with a grim mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away.

"Girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, "I don't know that girl. Who is that girl?"

"Sissy Jupe, sir," explained number twenty, blushing, standing up, and curtseying.

"Sissy is not a name," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Don't call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia."

"It's father as calls me Sissy, sir," returned the young girl in a trembling voice, and with another curtsey.

"Then he has no business to do it," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Tell him he mustn't. Cecilia Jupe. Let me see. What is your father?"

"He belongs to the horse-riding, if you please, sir."

Mr. Gradgrind frowned, and waved off the objectionable calling with his hand.

"We don't want to know anything about that, here. You mustn't tell us about that, here. Your father breaks horses, don't he?"

"If you please, sir, when they can get any to break, they do break horses in the ring, sir."

"You mustn't tell us about the ring, here. Very well, then. Describe your father as a horsebreaker. He doctors sick horses, I dare say?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Very well, then. He is a veterinary surgeon, a farrier, and horsebreaker. Give me your definition of a horse."

(Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand.)

"Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!" said Mr. Gradgrind, for the general behoof of all the little pitchers. "Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours."

The square finger, moving here and there, lighted suddenly on Bitzer, perhaps because he chanced to sit in the same ray of sunlight which, darting in at one of the bare windows of the intensely whitewashed room, irradiated Sissy. For, the boys and girls sat on the face of the inclined plane in two compact bodies, divided up the centre by a narrow interval; and Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the sunny side, came in for the beginning of a sunbeam, of which Bitzer, being at the corner of a row on the other side, a few rows in advance, caught the end. But,

whereas the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun, when it shone upon her, the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed. His cold eyes would hardly have been eyes, but for the short ends of lashes which, by bringing them into immediate contrast with something paler than themselves, expressed their form. His short-cropped hair might have been a mere continuation of the sandy freckles on his forehead and face. His skin was so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if it were cut, he would bleed white.

"Bitzer," said Thomas Gradgrind. "Your definition of a horse."

"Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." Thus (and much more) Bitzer.

"Now girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind. "You know what a horse is."

She curtseyed again, and would have blushed deeper, if she could have blushed deeper than she had blushed all this time. Bitzer, after rapidly blinking at Thomas Gradgrind with both eyes at once, and so catching the light upon his quivering ends of lashes that they looked like the antennæ of busy insects, put his knuckles to his freckled forehead, and sat down again.

The third gentleman now stepped forth. A mighty man at cutting and drying, he was; a government officer; in his way (and in most other people's too), a professed pugilist; always in training, always with a system to force down the general throat like a bolus, always to be heard of at the bar of his little Public-office, ready to fight all England. To continue in fistic phraseology, he had a genius for coming up to the scratch, wherever and whatever it was, and proving himself an ugly customer. He would go in and damage any subject whatever with his right, follow up with his left, stop, exchange, counter, bore his opponent (he always fought all England) to the ropes, and fall upon him neatly. He was certain to knock the wind out of common sense, and render that unlucky adversary deaf to

the call of time. And he had it in charge from high authority to bring about the great public-office Millennium, when Commissioners should reign upon earth.

"Very well," said this gentleman, briskly smiling, and folding his arms.

"That's a horse. Now, let me ask you girls and boys, Would you paper a room with representations of horses?"

After a pause, one half of the children cried in chorus, "Yes, sir!" Upon which the other half, seeing in the gentleman's face that Yes was wrong, cried out in chorus, "No, sir!"—as the custom is, in these examinations.

"Of course, No. Why wouldn't you?"

A pause. One corpulent slow boy, with a wheezy manner of breathing, ventured the answer, Because he wouldn't paper a room at all, but would paint it.

"You *must* paper it," said the gentleman, rather warmly.

"You must paper it," said Thomas Gradgrind, "whether you like it or not. Don't tell *us* you wouldn't paper it. What do you mean, boy?"

"I'll explain to you, then," said the gentleman, after another and a dismal pause, "why you wouldn't paper a room with representations of horses. Do you ever see horses walking up and down the sides of rooms in reality—in fact? Do you?"

"Yes, sir!" from one half. "No, sir!" from the other.

"Of course no," said the gentleman, with an indignant look at the wrong half. "Why, then, you are not to see anywhere, what you don't see in fact; you are not to have anywhere, what you don't have in fact. What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact."

Thomas Gradgrind nodded his approbation.

"This is a new principle, a discovery, a great discovery," said the gentleman.

"Now, I'll try you again. Suppose you were going to carpet a room. Would you use a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it!"

There being a general conviction by this time that "No, sir!" was always the right answer to this gentleman, the chorus of No was very strong. Only a few feeble stragglers said Yes; among them Sissy Jupe.

"Girl number twenty," said the gentleman, smiling in the calm strength of knowledge.

Sissy blushed, and stood up.

"So you would carpet your room—or your husband's room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband—with representations of flowers, would you," said the gentleman. "Why would you?"

"If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers," returned the girl.

"And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?"

"It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither, if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy——"

"Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy," cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. "That's it! You are never to fancy."

"You are not, Cecilia Jupe," Thomas Gradgrind solemnly repeated, "to do anything of that kind."

"Fact, fact, fact!" said the gentleman. And "Fact, fact, fact!" repeated Thomas Gradgrind.

"You are to be in all things regulated and governed," said the gentleman, "by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use," said the gentleman, "for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste."

The girl curtseyed, and sat down. She was very young, and she looked as if she were frightened by the matter of fact prospect the world afforded.

"Now, if Mr. M'Choakumchild," said the gentleman, "will proceed to give his first lesson here, Mr. Gradgrind,

I shall be happy, at your request, to observe his mode of procedure."

Mr. Gradgrind was much obliged. "Mr. M'Choakumchild, we only wait for you."

So, Mr. M'Choakumchild began in his best manner. He and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs. He had been put through an immense variety of paces, and had answered volumes of head-breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography, and general cosmography, the sciences of compound proportion, algebra, land-surveying and levelling, vocal music, and drawing from models, were all at the ends of his ten chilled fingers. He had worked his stony way into Her Majesty's most Honourable Privy Council's Schedule B, and had taken the bloom off the higher branches of mathematics and physical science, French, German, Latin, and Greek. He knew all about all the Water Sheds of all the world (whatever they are), and all the histories of all the peoples, and all the names of all the rivers and mountains, and all the productions, manners, and customs of all the countries, and all their boundaries and bearings on the two and thirty points of the compass. Ah, rather overdone, M'Choakumchild. If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more!

He went to work in this preparatory lesson, not unlike Morgiana in the Forty Thieves: looking into all the vessels ranged before him, one after another, to see what they contained. Say, good M'Choakumchild. When from thy boiling store, thou shalt fill each jar brim full by-and-bye, dost thou think that thou wilt always kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within—or sometimes only maim him and distort him!

CHAPTER III.

A LOOPHOLE.

Mr. Gradgrind walked homeward from the school, in a state of considerable satisfaction. It was his school, and he intended it to be a model. He intended every child in it to be a model—just as the young Gradgrinds were all models.

There were five young Gradgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been lectured at, from their tenderest years; coursed, like little hares. Almost as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run to the lecture-room. The first object with which they had an association, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black board with a dry Ogre chalking ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Ogre. Fact forbid! I only use the word to express a monster in a lecturing castle, with Heaven knows how many heads manipulated into one, taking childhood captive, and dragging it into gloomy statistical dens by the hair.

No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly. No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle little star; how I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt, or with that yet more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb: it had never heard of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs.

To his matter of fact home, which was called Stone Lodge, Mr. Gradgrind directed his steps. He had virtually

retired from the wholesale hardware trade before he built Stone Lodge, and was now looking about for a suitable opportunity of making an arithmetical figure in Parliament. Stone Lodge was situated on a moor within a mile or two of a great town—called Coketown in the present faithful guide-book.

A very regular feature on the face of the country, Stone Lodge was. Not the least disguise toned down or shaded off that uncompromising fact in the landscape. A great square house, with a heavy portico darkening the principal windows, as its master's heavy brows overshadowed his eyes. A calculated, cast up, balanced, and proved house. Six windows on this side of the door, six on that side; a total of twelve in this wing, a total of twelve in the other wing; four-and-twenty carried over to the back wings. A lawn and garden and an infant avenue, all ruled straight like a botanical account-book. Gas and ventilation, drainage and water-service, all of the primest quality. Iron clamps and girders, fire-proof from top to bottom; mechanical lifts for the housemaids, with all their brushes and brooms; everything that heart could desire.

Everything? Well, I suppose so. The little Gradgrinds had cabinets in various departments of science too. They had a little conchological cabinet, and a little metallurgical cabinet, and a little mineralogical cabinet; and the specimens were all arranged and labelled, and the bits of stone and ore looked as though they might have been broken from the parent substances by those tremendously hard instruments their own names; and, to paraphrase the idle legend of Peter Piper, who had never found his way into their nursery. If the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at more than this, what was it for good gracious goodness' sake, that the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at!

Their father walked on in a hopeful and satisfied frame of mind. He was an affectionate father, after his manner; but he would probably have described himself (if he had been put, like Sissy Jupe, upon a definition) as "an eminently practical" father. He had a particular pride in the phrase eminently practical, which was considered to have a special application to him. Whatsoever the public meeting held in Coketown, and whatsoever the subject of such meeting, some Coketowner was sure to seize the occasion of alluding to his eminently practical friend Gradgrind. This

always pleased the eminently practical friend. He knew it to be his due, but his due was acceptable.

He had reached the neutral ground upon the outskirts of the town, which was neither town nor country, and yet was either spoiled, when his ears were invaded by the sound of music. The clashing and banging band attached to the horse-riding establishment which had there set up its rest in a wooden pavilion was in full bray. A flag, floating from the summit of the temple, proclaimed to mankind that it was "Sleary's Horse-riding" which claimed their suffrages. Sleary himself, a stout modern statue with a money-box at its elbow, in an ecclesiastical niche of early Gothic architecture, took the money. Miss Josephine Sleary, as some very long and very narrow strips of printed bill announced, was then inaugurating the entertainments with her graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act. Among the other pleasing but always strictly moral wonders which must be seen to be believed, Signor Jupe was that afternoon to "elucidate the diverting accomplishments of his highly trained performing dog Merrylegs." He was also to exhibit "his astounding feat of throwing seventy-five hundred-weight in rapid succession backhanded over his head, thus forming a fountain of solid iron in mid-air, a feat never before attempted in this or any other country, and which having elicited such rapturous plaudits from enthusiastic throngs it cannot be withdrawn." The same Signor Jupe was to "enliven the varied performances at frequent intervals with his chaste Shaksperean quips and retorts." Lastly, he was to wind them up by appearing in his favourite character of Mr. William Button, of Tooley Street, in "the highly novel and laughable hippo-comedietta of The Tailor's Journey to Brentford."

Thomas Gradgrind took no heed of these trivialities of course, but passed on as a practical man ought to pass on, either brushing the noisy insects from his thoughts, or consigning them to the House of Correction. But, the turning of the road took him by the back of the booth, and at the back of the booth a number of children were congregated in a number of stealthy attitudes, striving to peep in at the hidden glories of the place.

This brought him to a stop. "Now, to think of these vagabonds," said he, "attracting the young rabble from a model school."

A space of stunted grass and dry rubbish being between him and the young rabble, he took his eyeglass out of his waistcoat to look for any child he knew by name, and might order off. Phenomenon almost incredible though distinctly seen, what did he then behold but his own metallurgical Louisa, peeping with all her might through a hole in a deal board, and his own mathematical Thomas abasing himself on the ground to catch but a hoof of the graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act!

Dumb with amazement, Mr. Gradgrind crossed to the spot where his family was thus disgraced, laid his hand upon each erring child, and said:

"Louisa!! Thomas!!"

Both rose, red and disconcerted. But, Louisa looked at her father with more boldness than Thomas did. Indeed, Thomas did not look at him, but gave himself up to be taken home like a machine.

"In the name of wonder, idleness, and folly!" said Mr. Gradgrind, leading each away by a hand; "what do you do here?"

"Wanted to see what it was like," returned Louisa shortly.

"What it was like?"

"Yes, father."

There was an air of jaded sullenness in them both, and particularly in the girl: yet, struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression. Not with the brightness natural to cheerful youth, but with uncertain, eager, doubtful flashes, which had something painful in them, analogous to the changes on a blind face groping its way.

She was a child now, of fifteen or sixteen; but at no distant day would seem to become a woman all at once. Her father thought so as he looked at her. She was pretty. Would have been self-willed (he thought in his eminently practical way) but for her bringing-up.

"Thomas, though I have the fact before me, I find it difficult to believe that you, with your education and resources, should have brought your sister to a scene like this."

"I brought *him*, father," said Louisa, quickly. "I asked him to come."

"I am sorry to hear it. I am very sorry indeed to hear it. It makes Thomas no better, and it makes you worse, Louisa."

She looked at her father again, but no tear fell down her cheek.

"You! Thomas and you, to whom the circle of the sciences is open; Thomas and you, who may be said to be replete with facts; Thomas and you, who have been trained to mathematical exactness; Thomas and you, here!" cried Mr. Gradgrind. "In this degraded position! I am amazed."

"I was tired, father. I have been tired a long time," said Louisa.

"Tired? Of what?" asked the astonished father.

"I don't know of what—of everything I think."

"Say not another word," returned Mr. Gradgrind. "You are childish. I will hear no more." He did not speak again until they had walked some half-a-mile in silence, when he gravely broke out with: "What would your best friends say, Louisa? Do you attach no value to their good opinion? What would Mr. Bounderby say?"

At the mention of this name, his daughter stole a look at him, remarkable for its intense and searching character. He saw nothing of it, for before he looked at her, she had again cast down her eyes!

"What," he repeated presently, "would Mr. Bounderby say?" All the way to Stone Lodge, as with grave indignation he led the two delinquents home, he repeated at intervals, "What would Mr. Bounderby say!"—as if Mr. Bounderby had been Mrs. Grundy.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. BOUNDERBY.

Not being Mrs. Grundy, who *was* Mr. Bounderby?

Why, Mr. Bounderby was as near being Mr. Gradgrind's bosom friend, as a man perfectly devoid of sentiment can approach that spiritual relationship towards another man perfectly devoid of sentiment. So near was Mr. Bounderby —or, if the reader should prefer it, so far off.

He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility.

A year or two younger than his eminently practical friend, Mr. Bounderby looked older; his seven or eight and forty might have had the seven or eight added to it again, without surprising anybody. He had not much hair. One might have fancied he had talked it off; and that what was left, all standing up in disorder, was in that condition from being constantly blown about by his windy boastfulness.

In the formal drawing-room of Stone Lodge, standing on the hearthrug, warming himself before the fire, Mr. Bounderby delivered some observations to Mrs. Gradgrind on the circumstance of its being his birthday. He stood before the fire, partly because it was a cool spring afternoon, though the sun shone; partly because the shade of Stone Lodge was always haunted by the ghost of damp mortar; partly because he thus took up a commanding position, from which to subdue Mrs. Gradgrind.

"I hadn't a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name. I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty. That's the way I spent my tenth birthday. Not that a ditch was new to me, for I was born in a ditch."

Mrs. Gradgrind, a little, thin, white, pink-eyed bundle of shawls, of surpassing feebleness, mental and bodily; who was always taking physic without any effect, and who, whenever she showed a symptom of coming to life, was invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her; Mrs. Gradgrind hoped it was a dry ditch?

"No! As wet as a sop. A foot of water in it," said Mr. Bounderby.

"Enough to give a baby cold," Mrs. Gradgrind considered.

"Cold? I was born with inflammation of the lungs, and of everything else, I believe, that was capable of inflammation," returned Mr. Bounderby. "For years, ma'am, I was one of the most miserable little wretches ever seen. I was so sickly, that I was always moaning and groaning. I was so ragged and dirty, that you wouldn't have touched me with a pair of tongs."

Mrs. Gradgrind faintly looked at the tongs, as the most appropriate thing her imbecility could think of doing.

"How I fought through it, *I* don't know," said Bounderby. "I was determined, I suppose. I have been a determined character in later life, and I suppose I was then. Here I am, Mrs. Gradgrind, anyhow, and nobody to thank for my being here, but myself."

Mrs. Gradgrind meekly and weakly hoped that his mother—

"*My* mother? Bolted, ma'am!" said Bounderby.

Mrs. Gradgrind, stunned as usual, collapsed and gave it up.

"My mother left me to my grandmother," said Bounderby; "and, according to the best of my remembrance, my grandmother was the wickedest and the worst old woman that ever lived. If I got a little pair of shoes by any chance, she would take 'em off and sell 'em for drink. Why, I have known that grandmother of mine lie in her bed and drink her four-teen glasses of liquor before breakfast!"

Mrs. Gradgrind, weakly smiling, and giving no other sign of vitality, looked (as she always did) like an indifferently executed transparency of a small female figure, without enough light behind it.

"She kept a chandler's shop," pursued Bounderby, "and kept me in an egg-box. That was the cot of *my* infancy; an old egg-box. As soon as I was big enough to run away, of course I ran away. Then I became a young vagabond; and instead of one old woman knocking me about and starving me, everybody of all ages knocked me about and starved me. They were right; they had no business to do anything else. I was a nuisance, an incumbrance, and a pest. I know that very well."

His pride in having at any time of his life achieved such

a great social distinction as to be a nuisance, an incumbrance, and a pest, was only to be satisfied by three sonorous repetitions of the boast.

"I was to pull through it I suppose, Mrs. Gradgrind. Whether I was to do it or not, ma'am, I did it. I pulled through it, though nobody threw me out a rope. Vagabond, errand-boy, vagabond, labourer, porter, clerk, chief manager, small partner, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. Those are the antecedents, and the culmination. Josiah Bounderby of Coketown learnt his letters from the outsides of the shops, Mrs. Gradgrind, and was first able to tell the time upon a dial-plate, from studying the steeple clock of St. Giles's Church, London, under the direction of a drunken cripple, who was a convicted thief, and an incorrigible vagrant. Tell Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, of your district schools and your model schools, and your training schools, and your whole kettle-of-fish of schools; and Josiah Bounderby of Coketown tells you plainly, all right, all correct—he hadn't such advantages—but let us have hard-headed, solid-fisted people—the education that made him won't do for everybody, he knows well—such and such his education was, however, and you may force him to swallow boiling fat, but you shall never force him to suppress the facts of his life."

Being heated when he arrived at this climax, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown stopped. He stopped just as his eminently practical friend, still accompanied by the two young culprits, entered the room. His eminently practical friend, on seeing him, stopped also, and gave Louisa a reproachful look that plainly said, "Behold your Bounderby!"

"Well!" blustered Mr. Bounderby, "what's the matter? What is young Thomas in the dumps about?"

He spoke of young Thomas, but he looked at Louisa.

"We were peeping at the circus," muttered Louisa, haughtily, without lifting up her eyes, "and father caught us."

"And Mrs. Gradgrind," said her husband in a lofty manner, "I should as soon have expected to find my children reading poetry."

"Dear me," whimpered Mrs. Gradgrind. "How can you, Louisa and Thomas! I wonder at you. I declare you're enough to make one regret ever having had a family

at all. I have a great mind to say I wish I hadn't. *Then* what would you have done, I should like to know."

Mr. Gradgrind did not seem favourably impressed by these cogent remarks. He frowned impatiently.

"As if, with my head in its present throbbing state, you couldn't go and look at the shells and minerals and things provided for you, instead of circuses!" said Mrs. Gradgrind. "You know, as well as I do, no young people have circus masters, or keep circuses in cabinets, or attend lectures about circuses. What can you possibly want to know of circuses then? I am sure you have enough to do, if that's what you want. With my head in its present state, I couldn't remember the mere names of half the facts you have got to attend to."

"That's the reason!" pouted Louisa.

"Don't tell me that's the reason, because it can be nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Gradgrind. "Go and be somethingological directly." Mrs. Gradgrind was not a scientific character, and usually dismissed her children to their studies with this general injunction to choose their pursuit.

In truth, Mrs. Gradgrind's stock of facts in general was woefully defective; but Mr. Gradgrind in raising her to her high matrimonial position, had been influenced by two reasons. Firstly, she was most satisfactory as a question of figures; and, secondly, she had "no nonsense" about her. By nonsense he meant fancy; and truly it is probable she was as free from any alloy of that nature, as any human being not arrived at the perfection of an absolute idiot, ever was.

The simple circumstance of being left alone with her husband and Mr. Bounderby, was sufficient to stun this admirable lady again without collision between herself and any other fact. So, she once more died away, and nobody minded her.

"Bounderby," said Mr. Gradgrind, drawing a chair to the fireside, "you are always so interested in my young people—particularly in Louisa—that I make no apology for saying to you, I am very much vexed by this discovery. I have systematically devoted myself (as you know) to the eduation of the reason of my family. The reason is (as you know) the only faculty to which education should be addressed. And yet, Bounderby, it would appear from this

unexpected circumstance of to-day, though in itself a trifling one, as if something had crept into Thomas's and Louisa's minds which is—or rather, which is not—I don't know that I can express myself better than by saying—which has never been intended to be developed, and in which their reason has no part."

"There certainly is no reason in looking with interest at a parcel of vagabonds," returned Bounderby. "When I was a vagabond myself, nobody looked with any interest at *me;* I know that."

"Then comes the question," said the eminently practical father, with his eyes on the fire, "in what has this vulgar curiosity its rise?"

"I'll tell you in what. In idle imagination."

"I hope not," said the eminently practical; "I confess, however, that the misgiving *has* crossed me on my way home."

"In idle imagination, Gradgrind," repeated Bounderby. "A very bad thing for anybody, but a cursed bad thing for a girl like Louisa. I should ask Mrs Gradgrind's pardon for strong expressions, but that she knows very well I am not a refined character. Whoever expects refinement in *me* will be disappointed. I hadn't a refined bringing up."

"Whether," said Mr. Gradgrind, pondering with his hands in his pockets, and his cavernous eyes on the fire, "whether any instructor or servant can have suggested anything? Whether Louisa or Thomas can have been reading anything? Whether, in spite of all precautions, any idle storybook can have got into the house? Because, in minds that have been practically formed by rule and line, from the cradle upwards, this is so curious, so incomprehensible."

"Stop a bit!" cried Bounderby, who all this time had been standing, as before, on the hearth, bursting at the very furniture of the room with explosive humility. "You have one of those strollers' children in the school."

"Cecilia Jupe, by name," said Mr. Gradgrind, with something of a stricken look at his friend.

"Now, stop a bit!" cried Bounderby again. "How did she come there?"

"Why, the fact is, I saw the girl myself, for the first time, only just now. She specially applied here at the

house to be admitted, as not regularly belonging to our town, and—yes, you are right, Bounderby, you are right."

"Now, stop a bit!" cried Bounderby, once more. "Louisa saw her when she came?"

"Louisa certainly did see her, for she mentioned the application to me. But Louisa saw her, I have no doubt, in Mrs. Gradgrind's presence."

"Pray, Mrs. Gradgrind," said Bounderby, "what passed?"

"Oh, my poor health!" returned Mrs. Gradgrind. "The girl wanted to come to the school, and Mr. Gradgrind wanted girls to come to the school, and Louisa and Thomas both said that the girl wanted to come, and that Mr. Gradgrind wanted girls to come, and how was it possible to contradict them when such was the fact!"

"Now I tell you what, Gradgrind!" said Mr. Bounderby. "Turn this girl to the right about, and there's an end of it."

"I am much of your opinion."

"Do it at once," said Bounderby, "has always been my motto from a child. When I thought I would run away from my egg-box and my grandmother, I did it at once. Do you the same. Do this at once!"

"Are you walking?" asked his friend. "I have the father's address. Perhaps you would not mind walking to town with me?"

"Not the least in the world," said Mr. Bounderby, "as long as you do it at once!"

So, Mr. Bounderby threw on his hat—he always threw it on, as expressing a man who had been far too busily employed in making himself, to acquire any fashion of wearing his hat—and with his hands in his pockets, sauntered out into the hall. "I never wear gloves," it was his custom to say. "I didn't climb up the ladder in *them*. Shouldn't be so high up, if I had."

Being left to saunter in the hall a minute or two while Mr. Gradgrind went upstairs for the address, he opened the door of the children's study and looked into that serene floorclothed apartment, which, notwithstanding its bookcases and its cabinets and its variety of learned and philosophical appliances, had much of the genial aspect of a room devoted to haircutting. Louisa languidly leaned upon the window looking out, without looking at anything, while young Thomas stood sniffing revengefully at the fire.

Adam Smith and Malthus, two younger Gradgrinds, were out at lecture in custody; and little Jane, after manufacturing a good deal of moist pipe-clay on her face with slate-pencil and tears, had fallen asleep over vulgar fractions.

"It's all right now, Louisa: it's all right, young Thomas," said Mr. Bounderby; "you won't do so any more. I'll answer for it's being all over with father. Well, Louisa, that's worth a kiss, isn't it?"

"You can take one, Mr. Bounderby," returned Louisa, when she had coldly paused, and slowly walked across the room, and ungraciously raised her cheek towards him, with her face turned away.

"Always my pet; ain't you, Louisa?" said Mr. Bounderby. "Good bye, Louisa!"

He went his way, but she stood on the same spot, rubbing the cheek he had kissed, with her handkerchief, until it was burning red. She was still doing this, five minutes afterwards.

"What are you about, Loo?" her brother sulkily remonstrated. "You'll rub a hole in your face."

"You may cut the piece out with your penknife if you like, Tom. I wouldn't cry!"

CHAPTER V.

THE KEY-NOTE.

Coketown, to which Messrs. Bounderby and Gradgrind now walked, was a triumph of fact; it had no greater taint of fancy in it than Mrs. Gradgrind herself. Let us strike the key-note, Coketown, before pursuing our tune.

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage.

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled.

It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all

day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained; against them were to be set off, comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned. The rest of its features were voluntary, and they were these.

You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there—as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done—they made it a pious warehouse of red brick, with sometimes (but this is only in highly ornamented examples) a bell in a birdcage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church; a stuccoed edifice with a square steeple over the door, terminating in four short pinnacles like florid wooden legs. All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and salable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

A town so sacred to fact, and so triumphant in its assertion, of course got on well? Why no, not quite well. No? Dear me!

No. Coketown did not come out of its own furnaces, in all respects like gold that had stood the fire. First, the perplexing mystery of the place was, Who belonged to the eighteen denominations? Because, whoever did, the labouring people did not. It was very strange to walk through the streets on a Sunday morning, and note how few of *them* the barbarous jangling of bells that was driving the sick and nervous mad, called away from their own quarter, from their own close rooms, from the corners of their own streets, where they lounged listlessly, gazing at all the church and chapel going, as at a thing with which they had no manner of concern. Nor was it merely the stranger who noticed this, because there was a native organisation in Coketown itself, whose members were to be heard of in the House of Commons every session, indignantly petitioning for acts of parliament that should make these people religious by main force. Then came the Teetotal Society, who complained that these same people *would* get drunk, and showed in tabular statements that they did get drunk, and proved at tea parties that no inducement, human or Divine (except a medal), would induce them to forego their custom of getting drunk. Then came the chemist and druggist, with other tabular statements, showing that when they didn't get drunk, they took opium. Then came the experienced chaplain of the jail, with more tabular statements, outdoing all the previous tabular statements, and showing that the same people *would* resort to low haunts, hidden from the public eye, where they heard low singing and saw low dancing, and mayhap joined in it; and where A. B., aged twenty-four next birthday, and committed for eighteen months' solitary, had himself said (not that he had ever shown himself particularly worthy of belief) his ruin began, as he was perfectly sure and confident that otherwise he would have been a tip-top moral specimen. Then came Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby, the two gentlemen at this present moment walking through Coketown, and both eminently practical, who could, on occasion, furnish more tabular statements derived from their own personal experience, and illustrated by cases they had known and seen, from which it clearly appeared—in short, it was the only clear thing in the case—that these same people were a bad lot altogether, gentlemen; that do what you would for them they were never thankful for it, gen-

tlemen; that they were restless, gentlemen; that they never knew what they wanted; that they lived upon the best, and bought fresh butter; and insisted on Mocha coffee, and rejected all but prime parts of meat, and yet were eternally dissatisfied and unmanageable. In short it was the moral of the old nursery fable:

> There was an old woman, and what do you think?
> She lived upon nothing but victuals and drink;
> Victuals and drink were the whole of her diet,
> And yet this old woman would NEVER be quiet.

Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds? Surely, none of us in our sober senses and acquainted with figures, are to be told at this time of day, that one of the foremost elements in the existence of the Coketown working-people had been for scores of years, deliberately set at nought? That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsions? That exactly in the ratio as they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them for some physical relief—some relaxation, encouraging good humour and good spirits, and giving them a vent—some recognised holiday though it were but for an honest dance to a stirring band of music—some occasional light pie in which even M'Choakumchild had no finger—which craving must and would be satisfied aright, or must and would inevitably go wrong, until the laws of the Creation were repealed?

"This man lives at Pod's End, and I don't quite know Pod's End," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Which is it, Bounderby?"

Mr. Bounderby knew it was somewhere down town, but knew no more respecting it. So they stopped for a moment, looking about.

Almost as they did so, there came running round the corner of the street at a quick pace and with a frightened look, a girl whom Mr. Gradgrind recognised. "Halloa!" said he. "Stop! Where are you going? Stop!" Girl number twenty stopped then, palpitating, and made him a curtsey.

"Why are you tearing about the streets," said Mr. Gradgrind, "in this improper manner?"

"I was—I was run after, sir," the girl panted, "and I wanted to get away."

"Run after?" repeated Mr. Gradgrind. "Who would run after *you?*"

The question was unexpectedly and suddenly answered for her, by the colourless boy, Bitzer, who came round the corner with such blind speed and so little anticipating a stoppage on the pavement, that he brought himself up against Mr. Gradgrind's waistcoat and rebounded into the road.

"What do you mean, boy?" said Mr. Gradgrind. "What are you doing? How dare you dash against—everybody—in this manner?"

Bitzer picked up his cap, which the concussion had knocked off; and backing, and knuckling his forehead, pleaded that it was an accident.

"Was this boy running after you, Jupe?" asked Mr. Gradgrind.

"Yes, sir," said the girl reluctantly.

"No, I wasn't, sir!" cried Bitzer. "Not till she ran away from me. But the horse-riders never mind what they say, sir; they're famous for it. You know the horse-riders are famous for never minding what they say," addressing Sissy. "It's as well known in the town as—please, sir, as the multiplication table isn't known to the horse-riders." Bitzer tried Mr. Bounderby with this.

"He frightened me so," said the girl, "with his cruel faces!"

"Oh!" cried Bitzer. "Oh! An't you one of the rest! An't you a horse-rider! I never looked at her, sir. I asked her if she would know how to define a horse to-morrow, and offered to tell her again, and she ran away, and I ran after her, sir, that she might know how to answer when she was asked. You wouldn't have thought of saying such mischief if you hadn't been a horse-rider!"

"Her calling seems to be pretty well known among 'em," observed Mr. Bounderby. "You'd have had the whole school peeping in a row, in a week."

"Truly, I think so," returned his friend. "Bitzer, turn you about and take yourself home. Jupe, stay here a moment. Let me hear of your running in this manner any more, boy, and you will hear of me through the master of the school. You understand what I mean. Go along."

The boy stopped in his rapid blinking, knuckled his forehead again, glanced at Sissy, turned about, and retreated.

"Now, girl," said Mr. Gradgrind, "take this gentleman and me to your father's; we are going there. What have you got in that bottle you are carrying?"

"Gin," said Mr. Bounderby.

"Dear, no, sir! It's the nine oils."

"The what?" cried Mr. Bounderby.

"The nine oils, sir. To rub father with." Then said Mr. Bounderby, with a loud short laugh, "What the devil do you rub your father with nine oils for?"

"It's what our people always use, sir, when they get any hurts in the ring," replied the girl, looking over her shoulder, to assure herself that her pursuer was gone. "They bruise themselves very bad sometimes."

"Serve 'em right," said Mr. Bounderby, "for being idle." She glanced up at his face, with mingled astonishment and dread.

"By George!" said Mr. Bounderby, "when I was four or five years younger than you, I had worse bruises upon me than ten oils, twenty oils, forty oils, would have rubbed off. I didn't get 'em by posture-making, but by being banged about. There was no rope-dancing for me; I danced on the bare ground and was larruped with the rope."

Mr. Gradgrind, though hard enough, was by no means so rough a man as Mr. Bounderby. His character was not unkind, all things considered; it might have been a very kind one indeed, if he had only made some round mistake in the arithmetic that balanced it, years ago. He said, in what he meant for a reassuring tone, as they turned down a narrow road, "And this is Pod's End; is it, Jupe?"

"This is it, sir, and—if you wouldn't mind, sir—this is the house."

She stopped, at twilight, at the door of a mean little public-house, with dim red lights in it. As haggard and as shabby, as if, for want of custom, it had itself taken to drinking, and had gone the way all drunkards go, and was very near the end of it.

"It's only crossing the bar, sir, and up the stairs, if you wouldn't mind, and waiting there for a moment till I get a candle. If you should hear a dog, sir, it's only Merrylegs, and he only barks."

"Merrylegs and nine oils, eh!" said Mr. Bounderby, entering last with his metallic laugh. "Pretty well this, for a self-made man!"

CHAPTER VI.

SLEARY'S HORSEMANSHIP.

The name of the public-house was the Pegasus's Arms. The Pegasus's legs might have been more to the purpose; but, underneath the winged horse upon the signboard, the Pegasus's Arms was inscribed in Roman letters. Beneath that inscription again, in a flowing scroll, the painter had touched off the lines:

> Good malt makes good beer,
> Walk in, and they'll draw it here;
> Good wine makes good brandy,
> Give us a call, and you'll find it handy.

Framed and glazed upon the wall behind the dingy little bar, was another Pegasus—a theatrical one—with real gauze let in for his wings, golden stars stuck on all over him, and his ethereal harness made of red silk.

As it had grown too dusky without, to see the sign, and as it had not grown light enough within to see the picture, Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby received no offence from these idealities. They followed the girl up some steep corner-stairs without meeting any one, and stopped in the dark while she went on for a candle. They expected every moment to hear Merrylegs give tongue, but the highly trained performing dog had not barked when the girl and the candle appeared together.

"Father is not in our room, sir," she said, with a face of great surprise. "If you wouldn't mind walking in, I'll find him directly."

They walked in; and Sissy, having set two chairs for them, sped away with a quick light step. It was a mean, shabbily furnished room, with a bed in it. The white night-cap, embellished with two peacock's feathers and a pigtail bolt upright, in which Signor Jupe had that very afternoon enlivened the varied performances with his chaste Shaksperian quips and retorts, hung upon a nail; but no other portion of his wardrobe, or other token of himself or his pursuits, was to be seen anywhere. As to Merrylegs,

that respectable ancestor of the highly trained animal who went aboard the ark, might have been accidentally shut out of it, for any sign of a dog that was manifest to eye or ear in the Pegasus's Arms.

They heard the doors of rooms above, opening and shutting as Sissy went from one to another in quest of her father; and presently they heard voices expressing surprise. She came bounding down again in a great hurry, opened a battered and mangy old hair trunk, found it empty, and looked round with her hands clasped and her face full of terror.

"Father must have gone down to the Booth, sir. I don't know why he should go there, but he must be there; I'll bring him in a minute!" She was gone directly, without her bonnet; with her long, dark, childish hair streaming behind her.

"What does she mean!" said Mr. Gradgrind. "Back in a minute? It's more than a mile off."

Before Mr. Bounderby could reply, a young man appeared at the door, and introducing himself with the words, "By your leaves, gentlemen!" walked in with his hands in his pockets. His face, close-shaven, thin, and sallow, was shaded by a great quantity of dark hair, brushed into a roll all round his head, and parted up the centre. His legs were very robust, but shorter than legs of good proportions should have been. His chest and back were as much too broad, as his legs were too short. He was dressed in a Newmarket coat and tight-fitting trousers; wore a shawl round his neck; smelt of lamp-oil, straw, orange-peel, horses' provender, and sawdust; and looked a most remarkable sort of Centaur, compounded of the stable and the play-house. Where the one began, and the other ended, nobody could have told with any precision. This gentleman was mentioned in the bills of the day as Mr. E. W. B. Childers, so justly celebrated for his daring vaulting act as the Wild Huntsman of the North American Prairies; in which popular performance, a diminutive boy with an old face, who now accompanied him, assisted as his infant son: being carried upside down over his father's shoulder, by one foot, and held by the crown of his head, heels upwards, in the palm of his father's hand, according to the violent paternal manner in which wild huntsmen may be observed to fondle their offspring. Made up with curls, wreaths,

wings, white bismuth, and carmine, this hopeful young person soared into so pleasing a Cupid as to constitute the chief delight of the maternal part of the spectators; but in private, where his characteristics were a precocious cutaway coat and an extremely gruff voice, he became of the Turf, turfy.

"By your leaves, gentlemen," said Mr. E. W. B. Childers, glancing round the room. "It was you, I believe, that were wishing to see Jupe!"

"It was," said Mr. Gradgrind. "His daughter has gone to fetch him, but I can't wait; therefore, if you please, I will leave a message for him with you."

"You see, my friend," Mr. Bounderby put in, "we are the kind of people who know the value of time, and you are the kind of people who don't know the value of time."

"I have not," retorted Mr. Childers, after surveying him from head to foot, "the honour of knowing *you*,—but if you mean that you can make more money of your time than I can of mine, I should judge from your appearance, that you are about right."

"And when you have made it, you can keep it too, I should think," said Cupid.

"Kidderminster, stow that!" said Mr. Childers. (Master Kidderminster was Cupid's mortal name.)

"What does he come here cheeking us for, then?" cried Master Kidderminster, showing a very irascible temperament. "If you want to cheek us, pay your ochre at the doors and take it out."

"Kidderminster," said Mr. Childers, raising his voice, "stow that!—Sir," to Mr. Gradgrind, "I was addressing myself to you. You may or you may not be aware (for perhaps you have not been much in the audience), that Jupe has missed his tip very often, lately."

"Has—what has he missed?" asked Mr. Gradgrind, glancing at the potent Bounderby for assistance.

"Missed his tip."

"Offered at the Garters four times last night, and never done 'em once," said Master Kidderminster. "Missed his tip at the banners, too, and was loose in his ponging."

"Didn't do what he ought to do. Was short in his leaps and bad in his tumbling," Mr. Childers interpreted.

"Oh!" said Mr. Gradgrind, "that is tip, is it?"

"In a general way that's missing his tip," Mr. E. W. B. Childers answered.

"Nine oils, Merrylegs, missing tips, garters, banners, and Ponging, eh!" ejaculated Bounderby, with his laugh of laughs. "Queer sort of company, too, for a man who has raised himself."

"Lower yourself, then," retorted Cupid. "Oh Lord! if you've raised yourself so high as all that comes to, let yourself down a bit."

"This is a very obtrusive lad!" said Mr. Gradgrind, turning, and knitting his brows on him.

"We'd have had a young gentleman to meet you, if we had known you were coming," retorted Master Kidderminster, nothing abashed. "It's a pity you don't have a bespeak, being so particular. You're on the Tight-Jeff, ain't you?"

"What does this unmannerly boy mean," asked Mr. Gradgrind, eyeing him in a sort of desperation, "by Tight-Jeff?"

"There! Get out, get out!" said Mr. Childers, thrusting his young friend from the room, rather in the prairie manner. "Tight-Jeff or Slack-Jeff, it don't much signify: it's only tight-rope and slack-rope. You were going to give me a message for Jupe?"

"Yes, I was."

"Then," continued Mr. Childers, quickly, "my opinion is, he will never receive it. Do you know much of him?"

"I never saw the man in my life."

"I doubt if you ever *will* see him now. It's pretty plain to me, he's off."

"Do you mean that he has deserted his daughter?"

"Ay! I mean," said Mr. Childers, with a nod, "that he has cut. He was goosed last night, he was goosed the night before last, he was goosed to-day. He has lately got in the way of being always goosed, and he can't stand it."

"Why has he been—so very much—Goosed?" asked Mr. Gradgrind, forcing the word out of himself, with great solemnity and reluctance.

"His joints are turning stiff, and he is getting used up," said Childers. "He has his points as a Cackler still, but he can't get a living out of *them*."

"A Cackler!" Bounderby repeated. "Here we go again!"

"A speaker, if the gentleman likes it better," said Mr. E. W. B. Childers, superciliously throwing the interpretation over his shoulder, and accompanying it with a shake of his long hair—which all shook at once. "Now, it's a remarkable fact, sir, that it cut that man deeper, to know that his daughter knew of his being goosed, than to go through with it."

"Good!" interrupted Mr. Bounderby. "This is good, Gradgrind! A man so fond of his daughter, that he runs away from her! This is devilish good! Ha! ha! Now, I'll tell you what, young man. I haven't always occupied my present station of life. I know what these things are. You may be astonished to hear it, but my mother ran away from *me*."

E. W. B. Childers replied pointedly, that he was not at all astonished to hear it.

"Very well," said Bounderby. "I was born in a ditch, and my mother ran away from me. Do I excuse her for it? No. Have I ever excused her for it? Not I. What do I call her for it? I call her probably the very worst woman that ever lived in the world, except my drunken grandmother. There's no family pride about me, there's no imaginative sentimental humbug about me. I call a spade a spade; and I call the mother of Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, without any fear or any favour, what I should call her if she had been the mother of Dick Jones of Wapping. So, with this man. He is a runaway rogue and a vagabond, that's what he is, in English."

"It's all the same to me what he is or what he is not, whether in English or whether in French," retorted Mr. E. W. B. Childers, facing about. "I am telling your friend what's the fact; if you don't like to hear it, you can avail yourself of the open air. You give it mouth enough, you do; but give it mouth in your own building at least," remonstrated E. W. B. with stern irony. "Don't give it mouth in this building, till you're called upon. You have got some building of your own, I dare say, now?"

"Perhaps so," replied Mr. Bounderby, rattling his money and laughing.

"Then give it mouth in your own building, will you, if you please!" said Childers. "Because this isn't a strong building, and too much of you might bring it down!"

Eyeing Mr. Bounderby from head to foot again, he turned

from him, as from a man finally disposed of, to Mr. Gradgrind.

"Jupe sent his daughter out on an errand not an hour ago, and then was seen to slip out himself, with his hat over his eyes, and a bundle tied up in a handkerchief under his arm. She will never believe it of him but he has cut away and left her."

"Pray," said Mr. Gradgrind, "why will she never believe it of him?"

"Because those two were one. Because they were never asunder. Because, up to this time, he seemed to dote upon her," said Childers, taking a step or two to look into the empty trunk. Both Mr. Childers and Master Kidderminster walked in a curious manner; with their legs wider apart than the general run of men, and with a very knowing assumption of being stiff in the knees. This walk was common to all the male members of Sleary's company, and was understood to express, that they were always on horseback.

"Poor Sissy! He had better have apprenticed her," said Childers, giving his hair another shake, as he looked up from the empty box. "Now, he leaves her without anything to take to."

"It is creditable to you, who have never been apprenticed, to express that opinion," returned Mr. Gradgrind, approvingly.

"*I* never apprenticed? I was apprenticed when I was seven years old."

"Oh! Indeed?" said Mr. Gradgrind, rather resentfully, as having been defrauded of his good opinion. "I was not aware of its being the custom to apprentice young persons to——"

"Idleness," Mr. Bounderby put in with a loud laugh. "No, by the Lord Harry! Nor I!"

"Her father always had it in his head," resumed Childers, feigning unconsciousness of Mr. Bounderby's existence, "that she was to be taught the deuce-and-all of education. How it got into his head, I can't say; I can only say that it never got out. He has been picking up a bit of reading for her, here—and a bit of writing for her, there—and a bit of ciphering for her, somewhere else—these seven years."

Mr. E. W. B. Childers took one of his hands out of his

pockets, stroked his face and chin, and looked, with a good deal of doubt and a little hope, at Mr. Gradgrind. From the first he had sought to conciliate that gentleman, for the sake of the deserted girl.

"When Sissy got into the school here," he pursued, "her father was as pleased as Punch. I couldn't altogether make out why, myself, as we were not stationary here, being but comers and goers anywhere. I suppose, however, he had this move in his mind—he was always half-cracked—and then considered her provided for. If you should happen to have looked in to-night, for the purpose of telling him that you were going to do her any little service," said Mr. Childers, stroking his face again, and repeating his look, "it would be very fortunate and well-timed; *very* fortunate and well-timed."

"On the contrary," returned Mr. Gradgrind. "I came to tell him that her connections made her not an object for the school, and that she must not attend any more. Still, if her father really has left her, without any connivance on her part—Bounderby, let me have a word with you."

Upon this, Mr. Childers politely betook himself, with his equestrian walk, to the landing outside the door, and there stood stroking his face, and softly whistling. While thus engaged, he overheard such phrases in Mr. Bounderby's voice as "No. *I* say no. I advise you not. I say by no means." While, from Mr. Gradgrind, he heard in his much lower tone the words, "But even as an example to Louisa, of what this pursuit which has been the subject of a vulgar curiosity, leads to and ends in. Think of it, Bounderby, in that point of view."

Meanwhile, the various members of Sleary's company gradually gathered together from the upper regions, where they were quartered, and, from standing about, talking in low voices to one another and to Mr. Childers, gradually insinuated themselves and him into the room. There were two or three handsome young women among them, with their two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine little children, who did the fairy business when required. The father of one of the families was in the habit of balancing the father of another of the families on the top of a great pole; the father of a third family often made a pyramid of both those fathers, with Master Kidderminster for the apex, and himself for the

base; all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing. All the mothers could (and did) dance, upon the slack wire and the tight rope, and perform rapid acts on bare-backed steeds; none of them were at all particular in respect of showing their legs; and one of them, alone in a Greek chariot, drove six in hand into every town they came to. They all assumed to be mighty rakish and knowing, they were not very tidy in their private dresses, they were not at all orderly in their domestic arrangements, and the combined literature of the whole company would have produced but a poor letter on any subject. Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the every-day virtues of any class of people in the world.

Last of all appeared Mr. Sleary: a stout man as already mentioned, with one fixed eye, and one loose eye, a voice (if it can be called so) like the efforts of a broken old pair of bellows, a flabby surface, and a muddled head which was never sober and never drunk.

"Thquire!" said Mr. Sleary, who was troubled with asthma, and whose breath came far too thick and heavy for the letter s, "Your thervant! Thith ith a bad piethe of bithnith, thith ith. You've heard of my Clown and hith dog being thuppothed to have morrithed?"

He addressed Mr. Gradgrind, who answered "Yes."

"Well, Thquire," he returned, taking off his hat, and rubbing the lining with his pocket-handkerchief, which he kept inside for the purpose. "Ith it your intenthion to do anything for the poor girl, Thquire?"

"I shall have something to propose to her when she comes back," said Mr. Gradgrind.

"Glad to hear it, Thquire. Not that I want to get rid of the child, any more than I want to thtand in her way. I'm willing to take her prentith, though at her age ith late. My voithe ith a little huthky, Thquire, and not eathy heard by them ath don't know me; but if you'd been chilled and heated, heated and chilled, chilled and heated in the ring when you wath young, ath often ath I have

been, *your* voithe wouldn't have lathted out, Thquire, no more than mine."

"I dare say not," said Mr. Gradgrind.

"What thall it be, Thquire, while you wait? Thall it be Therry? Give it a name, Thquire!" said Mr. Sleary, with hospitable ease.

"Nothing for me, I thank you," said Mr. Gradgrind.

"Don't thay nothing, Thquire. What doth your friend thay? If you haven't took your feed yet, have a glath of bitterth."

Here his daughter Josephine—a pretty fair-haired girl of eighteen, who had been tied on a horse at two years old, and had made a will at twelve, which she always carried about with her, expressive of her dying desire to be drawn to the grave by the two piebald ponies—cried, "Father, hush! she has come back!" Then came Sissy Jupe, running into the room as she had run out of it. And when she saw them all assembled, and saw their looks, and saw no father there, she broke into a most deplorable cry, and took refuge on the bosom of the most accomplished tight-rope lady (herself in the family-way), who knelt down on the floor to nurse her, and to weep over her.

"Ith an infernal thame, upon my soul it ith," said Sleary.

"O my dear father, my good kind father, where are you gone? You are gone to try to do me some good, I know! You are gone away for my sake, I am sure! And how miserable and helpless you will be without me, poor, poor father, until you come back!" It was so pathetic to hear her saying many things of this kind, with her face turned upward, and her arms stretched out as if she were trying to stop his departing shadow and embrace it, that no one spoke a word until Mr. Bounderby (growing impatient) took the case in hand.

"Now, good people all," said he, "this is wanton waste of time. Let the girl understand the fact. Let her take it from me, if you like, who have been run away from myself. Here, what's your name! Your father has absconded —deserted you—and you mustn't expect to see him again as long as you live."

They cared so little for plain Fact, these people, and were in that advanced state of degeneracy on the subject, that instead of being impressed by the speaker's strong common sense, they took it in extraordinary dudgeon.

The men muttered "Shame!" and the women "Brute!" and Sleary, in some haste, communicated the following hint, apart to Mr. Bounderby.

"I tell you what, Thquire. To thpeak plain to you, my opinion ith that you had better cut it thort, and drop it. They're a very good natur'd people, my people, but they're accuthtomed to be quick in their movementh; and if you don't act upon my advithe, I'm damned if I don't believe they'll pith you out o' winder."

Mr. Bounderby being restrained by this mild suggestion, Mr. Gradgrind found an opening for his eminently practical exposition of the subject.

"It is of no moment," said he, "whether this person is to be expected back at any time, or the contrary. He is gone away, and there is no present expectation of his return. That, I believe, is agreed on all hands."

"Thath agreed, Thquire. Thick to that!" From Sleary.

"Well then. I, who came here to inform the father of the poor girl, Jupe, that she could not be received at the school any more, in consequence of there being practical objections, into which I need not enter, to the reception there of the children of persons so employed, am prepared in these altered circumstances to make a proposal. I am willing to take charge of you, Jupe, and to educate you, and provide for you. The only condition (over and above your good behaviour) I make is, that you decide now, at once, whether to accompany me or remain here. Also, that if you accompany me now, it is understood that you communicate no more with any of your friends who are here present. These observations comprise the whole of the case."

"At the thame time," said Sleary, "I mutht put in my word, Thquire, tho that both thides of the banner may be equally theen. If you like, Thethilia, to be prenti'ht, you know the natur of the work and you know your companionth. Emma Gordon, in whothe lap you're a lying at prethent, would be a mother to you, and Joth'phine would be a thithter to you. I don't pretend to be of the angel breed mythelf, and I don't thay but what, when you mith'd your tip, you'd find me cut up rough, and thwear an oath or two at you. But what I thay, Thquire, ith, that good tempered or bad tempered, I never did a horthe a injury

yet, no more than thwearing at him went, and that I don't expect I thall begin otherwithe at my time of life, with a rider. I never wath much of a Cackler, Thquire, and I have thed my thay."

The latter part of this speech was addressed to Mr. Gradgrind, who received it with a grave inclination of his head, and then remarked:

"The only observation I will make to you, Jupe, in the way of influencing your decision, is, that it is highly desirable to have a sound practical education, and that even your father himself (from what I understand) appears, on your behalf, to have known and felt that much."

The last words had a visible effect upon her. She stopped in her wild crying, a little detached herself from Emma Gordon, and turned her face full upon her patron. The whole company perceived the force of the change, and drew a long breath together, that plainly said, "she will go!"

"Be sure you know your own mind, Jupe," Mr. Gradgrind cautioned her; "I say no more. Be sure you know your own mind!"

"When father comes back," cried the girl, bursting into tears again after a minute's silence, "how will he ever find me if I go away!"

"You may be quite at ease," said Mr. Gradgrind, calmly; he worked out the whole matter like a sum: "you may be quite at ease, Jupe, on that score. In such a case, your father, I apprehend, must find out Mr. ——"

"Thleary. Thath my name, Thquire. Not athamed of it. Known all over England, and alwayth paythe ith way."

"Must find out Mr. Sleary, who would then let him know where you went. I should have no power of keeping you against his wish, and he would have no difficulty, at any time, in finding Mr. Thomas Gradgrind of Coketown. I am well known."

"Well known," assented Mr. Sleary, rolling his loose eye. "You're one of the thort, Thquire, that keepth a prethiouth thight of money out of the houthe. But never mind that at prethent."

There was another silence; and then she exclaimed, sobbing with her hands before her face, "Oh give me my clothes, give me my clothes, and let me go away before I break my heart!"

The women sadly bestirred themselves to get the clothes together—it was soon done, for they were not many—and to pack them in a basket which had often travelled with them. Sissy sat all the time, upon the ground, still sobbing, and covering her eyes. Mr. Gradgrind and his friend Bounderby stood near the door, ready to take her away. Mr. Sleary stood in the middle of the room, with the male members of the company about him, exactly as he would have stood in the centre of the ring during his daughter Josephine's performance. He wanted nothing but his whip.

The basket packed in silence, they brought her bonnet to her, and smoothed her disordered hair, and put it on. Then they pressed about her, and bent over her in very natural attitudes, kissing and embracing her: and brought the children to take leave of her; and were a tender-hearted, simple, foolish set of women altogether.

"Now, Jupe," said Mr. Gradgrind. "If you are quite determined, come!"

But she had to take her farewell of the male part of the company yet, and every one of them had to unfold his arms (for they all assumed the professional attitude when they found themselves near Sleary), and give her a parting kiss—Master Kidderminster excepted, in whose young nature there was an original flavour of the misanthrope, who was also known to have harboured matrimonial views, and who moodily withdrew. Mr. Sleary was reserved until the last. Opening his arms wide he took her by both her hands, and would have sprung her up and down, after the riding-master manner of congratulating young ladies on their dismounting from a rapid act; but there was no rebound in Sissy, and she only stood before him crying.

"Good bye, my dear!" said Sleary. "You'll make your fortun, I hope, and none of our poor folkth will ever trouble you, I'll pound it. I with your father hadn't taken hith dog with him; ith a ill-conwenienth to have the dog out of the billth. But on thecond thoughth, he wouldn't have performed without hith mathter, tho ith ath broad ath ith long!"

With that he regarded her attentively with his fixed eye, surveyed his company with his loose one, kissed her, shook his head, and handed her to Mr. Gradgrind as to a horse.

"There the ith, Thquire," he said, sweeping her with a

professional glance as if she were being adjusted in her seat, "and the'll do you juthtithe. Good bye, Thethilia!"

"Good bye, Cecilia!" "Good bye, Sissy!" "God bless you, dear!" In a variety of voices from all the room.

But the riding-master eye had observed the bottle of the nine oils in her bosom, and he now interposed with "Leave the bottle, my dear; ith large to carry; it will be of no uthe to you now. Give it to me!"

"No, no!" she said, in another burst of tears. "Oh, no! Pray let me keep it for father till he comes back! He will want it when he comes back. He had never thought of going away, when he sent me for it. I must keep it for him, if you please!"

"Tho be it, my dear. (You thee how it ith, Thquire!) Farewell, Thethilia! My latht wordth to you ith thith, Thtick to the termth of your engagement, be obedient to the Thquire, and forget uth. But if, when you're grown up and married and well off, you come upon any horthe-riding ever, don't be hard upon it, don't be croth with it, give it a Bethpeak if you can, and think you might do wurth. People mutht be amuthed, Thquire, thomehow," continued Sleary, rendered more pursy than ever, by so much talking; "they can't be alwayth a working, nor yet they can't be alwayth a learning. Make the betht of uth; not the wurtht. I've got my living out of the horthe-riding all my life, I know; but I conthider that I lay down the philothophy of the thubject when I thay to you, Thquire, make the betht of uth: not the wurtht!"

The Sleary philosophy was propounded as they went downstairs; and the fixed eye of Philosophy—and its rolling eye, too—soon lost the three figures and the basket in the darkness of the street.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. SPARSIT.

Mr. Bounderby being a bachelor, an elderly lady presided over his establishment, in consideration of a certain annual stipend. Mrs. Sparsit was this lady's name; and she was a prominent figure in attendance on Mr. Bounder-

by's car, as it rolled along in triumph with the Bully of humility inside.

For, Mrs. Sparsit had not only seen different days, but was highly connected. She had a great aunt living in these very times called Lady Scadgers. Mr. Sparsit, deceased, of whom she was the relict, had been by the mother's side what Mrs. Sparsit still called "a Powler." Strangers of limited information and dull apprehension were sometimes observed not to know what a Powler was, and even to appear uncertain whether it might be a business, or a political party, or a profession of faith. The better class of minds, however, did not need to be informed that the Powlers were an ancient stock, who could trace themselves so exceedingly far back that it was not surprising if they sometimes lost themselves—which they had rather frequently done, as respected horse-flesh, blind-hookey, Hebrew monetary transactions, and the Insolvent Debtors Court.

The late Mr. Sparsit, being by the mother's side a Powler, married this lady, being by the father's side a Scadgers. Lady Scadgers (an immensely fat old woman, with an inordinate appetite for butchers' meat, and a mysterious leg which had now refused to get out of bed for fourteen years) contrived the marriage, at a period when Sparsit was just of age, and chiefly noticeable for a slender body, weakly supported on two long slim props, and surmounted by no head worth mentioning. He inherited a fair fortune from his uncle, but owed it all before he came into it, and spent it twice over immediately afterwards. Thus, when he died, at twenty-four (the scene of his decease, Calais, and the cause, brandy), he did not leave his widow, from whom he had been separated soon after the honeymoon, in affluent circumstances. That bereaved lady, fifteen years older than he, fell presently at deadly feud with her only relative, Lady Scadgers; and, partly to spite her ladyship, and partly to maintain herself, went out at a salary. And here she was now, in her elderly days, with the Coriolanian style of nose and the dense black eyebrows which had captivated Sparsit, making Mr. Bounderby's tea as he took his breakfast.

If Bounderby had been a Conqueror, and Mrs. Sparsit a captive Princess whom he took about as a feature in his state-processions, he could not have made a greater flourish

with her than he habitually did. Just as it belonged to his boastfulness to depreciate his own extraction, so it belonged to it to exalt Mrs. Sparsit's. In the measure that he would not allow his own youth to have been attended by a single favourable circumstance, he brightened Mrs. Sparsit's juvenile career with every possible advantage, and showered wagon-loads of early roses all over that lady's path. "And yet, sir," he would say, "how does it turn out after all? Why here she is at a hundred a year (I give her a hundred, which she is pleased to term handsome), keeping the house of Josiah Bounderby of Coketown!"

Nay, he made this foil of his so very widely known, that third parties took it up, and handled it on some occasions with considerable briskness. It was one of the most exasperating attributes of Bounderby, that he not only sang his own praises but stimulated other men to sing them. There was a moral infection of clap-trap in him. Strangers, modest enough elsewhere, started up at dinners in Coketown, and boasted, in quite a rampant way, of Bounderby. They made him out to be the Royal arms, the Union-Jack, Magna Charta, John Bull, Habeas Corpus, the Bill of Rights, An Englishman's house is his castle, Church and State, and God save the Queen, all put together. And as often (and it was very often) as an orator of this kind brought into his peroration,

> "Princes and lords may flourish or may fade,
> A breath can make them, as a breath has made,"

—it was, for certain, more or less understood among the company that he had heard of Mrs. Sparsit.

"Mr. Bounderby," said Mrs. Sparsit, "you are unusually slow, sir, with your breakfast this morning."

"Why, ma'am," he returned, "I am thinking about Tom Gradgrind's whim"; Tom Gradgrind, for a bluff independent manner of speaking—as if somebody were always endeavouring to bribe him with immense sums to say Thomas, and he wouldn't; "Tom Gradgrind's whim, ma'am, of bringing up the tumbling-girl."

"The girl is now waiting to know," said Mrs. Sparsit, "whether she is to go straight to the school, or up to the Lodge."

"She must wait, ma'am," answered Bounderby, "till I know myself. We shall have Tom Gradgrind down here

presently, I suppose. If he should wish her to remain here a day or two longer, of course she can, ma'am."

"Of course she can if you wish it, Mr. Bounderby."

"I told him I would give her a shake-down here, last night, in order that he might sleep on it before he decided to let her have any association with Louisa."

"Indeed, Mr. Bounderby? Very thoughtful of you!"

Mrs. Sparsit's Coriolanian nose underwent a slight expansion of the nostrils, and her black eyebrows contracted as she took a sip of tea.

"It's tolerably clear to *me*," said Bounderby, "that the little puss can get small good out of such companionship."

"Are you speaking of young Miss Gradgrind, Mr. Bounderby?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm speaking of Louisa."

"Your observation being limited to 'little puss,'" said Mrs. Sparsit, "and there being two little girls in question, I did not know which might be indicated by that expression."

"Louisa," repeated Mr. Bounderby. "Louisa, Louisa."

"You are quite another father to Louisa, sir." Mrs. Sparsit took a little more tea; and, as she bent her again contracted eyebrows over her steaming cup, rather looked as if her classical countenance were invoking the infernal gods.

"If you had said I was another father to Tom—young Tom, I mean, not my friend Tom Gradgrind—you might have been nearer the mark. I am going to take young Tom into my office. Going to have him under my wing, ma'am."

"Indeed? Rather young for that, is he not, sir?" Mrs. Sparsit's "sir," in addressing Mr. Bounderby, was a word of ceremony, rather exacting consideration for herself in the use, than honouring him.

"I'm not going to take him at once; he is to finish his educational cramming before then," said Bounderby. "By the Lord Harry, he'll have enough of it, first and last! He'd open his eyes, that boy would, if he knew how empty of learning *my* young maw was, at his time of life." Which, by-the-bye, he probably did know, for he had heard of it often enough. "But it's extraordinary the difficulty I have on scores of such subjects, in speaking to any one on

equal terms. Here, for example, I have been speaking to you this morning about tumblers. Why, what do *you* know about tumblers? At the time when, to have been a tumbler in the mud of the streets, would have been a godsend to me, a prize in the lottery to me, you were at the Italian Opera. You were coming out of the Italian Opera, ma'am, in white satin and jewels, a blaze of splendour, when I hadn't a penny to buy a link to light you."

"I certainly, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, with a dignity serenely mournful, "was familiar with the Italian Opera at a very early age."

"Egad, ma'am, so was I," said Bounderby, "—with the wrong side of it. A hard bed the pavement of its Arcade used to make, I assure you. People like you, ma'am, accustomed from infancy to lie on Down feathers, have no idea *how* hard a paving-stone is, without trying it. No, no, it's of no use my talking to *you* about tumblers. I should speak of foreign dancers, and the West End of London, and May Fair, and lords and ladies and honourables."

"I trust, sir," rejoined Mrs. Sparsit, with decent resignation, "it is not necessary that you should do anything of that kind. I hope I have learnt how to accommodate myself to the changes of life. If I have acquired an interest in hearing of your instructive experiences, and can scarcely hear enough of them, I claim no merit for that, since I believe it is a general sentiment."

"Well, ma'am," said her patron, "perhaps some people may be pleased to say that they do like to hear, in his own unpolished way, what Josiah Bounderby, of Coketown, has gone through. But you must confess that you were born in the lap of luxury, yourself. Come, ma'am, you know you were born in the lap of luxury."

"I do not, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit with a shake of her head, "deny it."

Mr. Bounderby was obliged to get up from the table, and stand with his back to the fire, looking at her; she was such an enhancement of his position.

"And you were in crack society. Devilish high society," he said, warming his legs.

"It is true, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, with an affectation of humility the very opposite of his, and therefore in no danger of jostling it.

"You were in the tip-top fashion, and all the rest of it," said Mr. Bounderby.

"Yes, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, with a kind of social widowhood upon her. "It is unquestionably true."

Mr. Bounderby, bending himself at the knees, literally embraced his legs in his great satisfaction and laughed aloud. Mr. and Miss Gradgrind being then announced, he received the former with a shake of the hand, and the latter with a kiss.

"Can Jupe be sent here, Bounderby?" asked Mr. Gradgrind.

Certainly. So Jupe was sent there. On coming in, she curtseyed to Mr. Bounderby, and to his friend Tom Gradgrind, and also to Louisa; but in her confusion unluckily omitted Mrs. Sparsit. Observing this, the blustrous Bounderby had the following remarks to make:

"Now, I tell you what, my girl. The name of that lady by the teapot, is Mrs. Sparsit. That lady acts as mistress of this house, and she is a highly connected lady. Consequently, if ever you come again into any room in this house, you will make a short stay in it if you don't behave towards that lady in your most respectful manner. Now, I don't care a button what you do to *me*, because I don't affect to be anybody. So far from having high connections I have no connections at all, and I come of the scum of the earth. But towards that lady, I do care what you do; and you shall do what is deferential and respectful, or you shall not come here."

"I hope, Bounderby," said Mr. Gradgrind, in a conciliatory voice, "that this was merely an oversight."

"My friend Tom Gradgrind suggests, Mrs. Sparsit," said Bounderby, "that this was merely an oversight. Very likely. However, as you are aware, ma'am, I don't allow of even oversights towards you."

"You are very good indeed, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, shaking her head with her state humility. "It is not worth speaking of."

Sissy, who all this time had been faintly excusing herself with tears in her eyes, was now waved over by the master of the house to Mr. Gradgrind. She stood looking intently at him, and Louisa stood coldly by, with her eyes upon the ground, while he proceeded thus:

"Jupe, I have made up my mind to take you into my

house; and, when you are not in attendance at the school, to employ you about Mrs. Gradgrind, who is rather an invalid. I have explained to Miss Louisa—this is Miss Louisa—the miserable but natural end of your late career; and you are to expressly understand that the whole of that subject is past, and is not to be referred to any more. From this time you begin your history. You are, at present, ignorant, I know."

"Yes, sir, very," she answered, curtseying.

"I shall have the satisfaction of causing you to be strictly educated; and you will be a living proof to all who come into communication with you, of the advantages of the training you will receive. You will be reclaimed and formed. You have been in the habit now of reading to your father, and those people I found you among, I dare say?" said Mr. Gradgrind, beckoning her nearer to him before he said so, and dropping his voice.

"Only to father and Merrylegs, sir. At least I mean to father, when Merrylegs was always there."

"Never mind Merrylegs, Jupe," said Mr. Gradgrind, with a passing frown. "I don't ask about him. I understand you to have been in the habit of reading to your father?"

"O yes, sir, thousands of times. They were the happiest—O, of all the happy times we had together, sir!"

It was only now when her sorrow broke out, that Louisa looked at her.

"And what," asked Mr. Gradgrind, in a still lower voice, did you read to your father, Jupe?"

"About the Fairies, sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies," she sobbed out; "and about——"

"Hush!" said Mr. Gradgrind, "that is enough. Never breathe a word of such destructive nonsense any more. Bounderby, this is a case for rigid training, and I shall observe it with interest."

"Well," returned Mr. Bounderby, "I have given you my opinion already, and I shouldn't do as you do. But, very well, very well. Since you are bent upon it, *very* well!"

So, Mr. Gradgrind and his daughter took Cecilia Jupe off with them to Stone Lodge, and on the way Louisa never spoke one word, good or bad. And Mr. Bounderby went about his daily pursuits. And Mrs. Sparsit got behind her eyebrows and meditated in the gloom of that retreat, all the evening.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEVER WONDER.

Let us strike the key-note again, before pursuing the tune.

When she was half a dozen years younger, Louisa had been overheard to begin a conversation with her brother one day, by saying "Tom, I wonder"—upon which Mr. Gradgrind, who was the person overhearing, stepped forth into the light and said, "Louisa, never wonder!"

Herein lay the spring of the mechanical art and mystery of educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections. Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, settle everything somehow, and never wonder. Bring to me, says M'Choakumchild, yonder baby just able to walk, and I will engage that it shall never wonder.

Now, besides very many babies just able to walk, there happened to be in Coketown a considerable population of babies who had been walking against time towards the infinite world, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years and more. These portentous infants being alarming creatures to stalk about in any human society, the eighteen denominations incessantly scratched one another's faces and pulled one another's hair by way of agreeing on the steps to be taken for their improvement—which they never did; a surprising circumstance, when the happy adaptation of the means to the end is considered. Still, although they differed in every other particular, conceivable and inconceivable (especially inconceivable), they were pretty well united on the point that these unlucky infants were never to wonder. Body number one, said they must take everything on trust. Body number two, said they must take everything on political economy. Body number three, wrote leaden little books for them, showing how the good grown-up baby invariably got to the Savings-bank, and the bad grown-up baby invariably got transported. Body number four, under dreary pretences of being droll (when it was very melan-

choly indeed), made the shallowest pretences of concealing pitfalls of knowledge, into which it was the duty of these babies to be smuggled and inveigled. But, all the bodies agreed that they were never to wonder.

There was a library in Coketown, to which general access was easy. Mr. Gradgrind greatly tormented his mind about what the people read in this library: a point whereon little rivers of tabular statements periodically flowed into the howling ocean of tabular statements, which no diver ever got to any depth in and came up sane. It was a disheartening circumstance, but a melancholy fact, that even these readers persisted in wondering. They wondered about human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours' work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took DeFoe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker. Mr. Gradgrind was for ever working, in print and out of print, at this eccentric sum, and he never could make out how it yielded this unaccountable product.

"I am sick of my life, Loo. I hate it altogether, and I hate everybody except you," said the unnatural young Thomas Gradgrind in the hair-cutting chamber at twilight.

"You don't hate Sissy, Tom?"

"I hate to be obliged to call her Jupe. And she hates me," said Tom, moodily.

"No, she does not, Tom, I am sure!"

"She must," said Tom. "She must just hate and detest the whole set-out of us. They'll bother her head off, I think, before they have done with her. Already she is getting as pale as wax, and as heavy as—I am."

Young Thomas expressed these sentiments sitting astride of a chair before the fire, with his arms on the back, and his sulky face on his arms. His sister sat in the darker corner by the fireside, now looking at him, now looking at the bright sparks as they dropped upon the hearth.

"As to me," said Tom, tumbling his hair all manner of ways with his sulky hands, "I am a Donkey, that's what *I* am. I am as obstinate as one, I am more stupid than one,

I get as much pleasure as one, and I should like to kick like one."

"Not me, I hope, Tom?"

"No, Loo; I wouldn't hurt *you*. I made an exception of you at first. I don't know what this—jolly old—Jaundiced Jail," Tom had paused to find a sufficiently complimentary and expressive name for the parental roof, and seemed to relieve his mind for a moment by the strong alliteration of this one, "would be without you."

"Indeed, Tom? Do you really and truly say so?"

"Why, of course I do. What's the use of talking about it!" returned Tom, chafing his face on his coat-sleeve, as if to mortify his flesh, and have it in unison with his spirit.

"Because, Tom," said his sister, after silently watching the sparks awhile, "as I get older, and nearer growing up, I often sit wondering here, and think how unfortunate it is for me that I can't reconcile you to home better than I am able to do. I don't know what other girls know. I can't play to you, or sing to you. I can't talk to you so as to enlighten your mind, for I never see any amusing sights or read any amusing books that it would be a pleasure or a relief to you to talk about, when you are tired."

"Well, no more do I. I am as bad as you in that respect; and I am a Mule too, which you're not. If father was determined to make me either a Prig or a Mule, and I am not a Prig, why, it stands to reason, I must be a Mule. And so I am," said Tom, desperately.

"It's a great pity," said Louisa, after another pause, and speaking thoughtfully out of her dark corner! "it's a great pity, Tom. It's very unfortunate for both of us."

"Oh! You," said Tom; "you are a girl, Loo, and a girl comes out of it better than a boy does. I don't miss anything in you. You are the only pleasure I have—you can brighten even this place—and you can always lead me as you like."

"You are a dear brother, Tom; and while you think I can do such things, I don't so much mind knowing better. Though I do know better, Tom, and am very sorry for it." She came and kissed him, and went back into her corner again.

"I wish I could collect all the Facts we hear so much about," said Tom, spitefully setting his teeth, "and all the

Figures, and all the people who found them out: and I wish I could put a thousand barrels of gunpowder under them, and blow them all up together! However, when I go to live with old Bounderby, I'll have my revenge."

"Your revenge, Tom?"

"I mean, I'll enjoy myself a little, and go about and see something, and hear something. I'll recompense myself for the way in which I have been brought up."

"But don't disappoint yourself beforehand, Tom. Mr. Bounderby thinks as father thinks, and is a great deal rougher, and not half so kind."

"Oh;" said Tom, laughing; "I don't mind that. I shall very well know how to manage and smooth old Bounderby!"

Their shadows were defined upon the wall, but those of the high presses in the room were all blended together on the wall and on the ceiling, as if the brother and sister were overhung by a dark cavern. Or, a fanciful imagination—if such treason could have been there—might have made it out to be the shadow of their subject, and of its lowering association with their future.

"What is your great mode of smoothing and managing, Tom? Is it a secret?"

"Oh!" said Tom, "if it is a secret, it's not far off. It's you. You are his little pet, you are his favourite; he'll do anything for you. When he says to me what I don't like, I shall say to him, 'My sister Loo will be hurt and disappointed, Mr. Bounderby. She always used to tell me she was sure you would be easier with me than this.' That'll bring him about, or nothing will."

After waiting for some answering remark, and getting none, Tom wearily relapsed into the present time, and twined himself yawning round and about the rails of his chair, and rumpled his head more and more, until he suddenly looked up, and asked:

"Have you gone to sleep, Loo?"

"No, Tom. I am looking at the fire."

"You seem to find more to look at in it than ever I could find," said Tom. "Another of the advantages, I suppose, of being a girl."

"Tom," inquired his sister, slowly, and in a curious tone, as if she were reading what she asked in the fire, and it were not quite plainly written there, "do you look

forward with any satisfaction to this change to Mr. Bounderby's?"

"Why, there's one thing to be said of it," returned Tom, pushing his chair from him, and standing up; "it will be getting away from home."

"There is one thing to be said of it," Louisa repeated in her former curious tone; "it will be getting away from home. Yes."

"Not but what I shall be very unwilling, both to leave you, Loo, and to leave you here. But I must go, you know, whether I like it or not; but I had better go where I can take with me some advantage of your influence, than where I should lose it altogether. Don't you see?"

"Yes, Tom."

The answer was so long in coming, though there was no indecision in it, that Tom went and leaned on the back of her chair, to contemplate the fire which so engrossed her, from her point of view, and see what he could make of it.

"Except that it is a fire," said Tom, "it looks to me as stupid and blank as everything else looks. What do you see in it? Not a circus?"

"I don't see anything in it, Tom, particularly. But since I have been looking at it, I have been wondering about you and me, grown up."

"Wondering again!" said Tom.

"I have such unmanageable thoughts," returned his sister, "that they *will* wonder."

"Then I beg of you, Louisa," said Mrs. Gradgrind, who had opened the door without being heard, "to do nothing of that description, for goodness' sake, you inconsiderate girl, or I shall never hear the last of it from your father. And Thomas, it is really shameful, with my poor head continually wearing me out, that a boy brought up as you have been, and whose education has cost what yours has, should be found encouraging his sister to wonder, when he knows his father has expressly said that she is not to do it."

Louisa denied Tom's participation in the offence; but her mother stopped her with the conclusive answer, "Louisa, don't tell me, in my state of health; for unless you have been encouraged, it is morally and physically impossible that you could have done it."

"I was encouraged by nothing, mother, but by looking at the red sparks dropping out of the fire, and whitening

and dying. It made me think, after all, how short my life would be, and how little I could hope to do in it."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Gradgrind, rendered almost energetic. "Nonsense! Don't stand there and tell me such stuff, Louisa, to my face, when you know very well that if it was ever to reach your father's ears I should never hear the last of it. After all the trouble that has been taken with you! After the lectures you have attended, and the experiments you have seen! After I have heard you myself, when the whole of my right side has been benumbed, going on with your master about combustion, and calcination, and calorification, and I may say every kind of ation that could drive a poor invalid distracted, to hear you talking in this absurd way about sparks and ashes! I wish," whimpered Mrs. Gradgrind, taking a chair, and discharging her strongest point before succumbing under these mere shadows of facts, "yes, I really *do* wish that I had never had a family, and then you would have known what it was to do without me!"

CHAPTER IX.

SISSY'S PROGRESS.

Sissy Jupe had not an easy time of it, between Mr. M'Choakumchild and Mrs. Gradgrind, and was not without strong impulses, in the first months of her probation, to run away. It hailed facts all day long so very hard, and life in general was opened to her as such a closely ruled ciphering-book, that assuredly she would have run away, but for only one restraint.

It is lamentable to think of; but this restraint was the result of no arithmetical process, was self-imposed in defiance of all calculation, and went dead against any table of probabilities that any Actuary would have drawn up from the premises. The girl believed that her father had not deserted her; she lived in the hope that he would come back, and in the faith that he would be made the happier by her remaining where she was.

The wretched ignorance with which Jupe clung to this consolation, rejecting the superior comfort of knowing, on

a sound arithmetical basis, that her father was an unnatural vagabond, filled Mr. Gradgrind with pity. Yet, what was to be done? M'Choakumchild reported that she had a very dense head for figures; that, once possessed with a general idea of the globe, she took the smallest conceivable interest in its exact measurements; that she was extremely slow in the acquisition of dates, unless some pitiful incident happened to be connected therewith; that she would burst into tears on being required (by the mental process) immediately to name the cost of two hundred and forty-seven muslin caps at fourteen-pence half-penny; that she was as low down, in the school, as low could be; that after eight weeks of induction into the elements of Political Economy, she had only yesterday been set right by a prattler three feet high, for returning to the question, "What is the first principle of this science?" the absurd answer, "To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me."

Mr. Gradgrind observed, shaking his head, that all this was very bad; that it showed the necessity of infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge, as per system, schedule, blue book, report, and tabular statements A to Z; and that Jupe "must be kept to it." So Jupe was kept to it, and became low-spirited, but no wiser.

"It would be a fine thing to be you, Miss Louisa!" she said, one night, when Louisa had endeavoured to make her perplexities for next day something clearer to her.

"Do you think so?"

"I should know so much, Miss Louisa. All that is difficult to me now, would be so easy then."

"You might not be the better for it, Sissy."

Sissy submitted, after a little hesitation. "I should not be the worse, Miss Louisa." To which Miss Louisa answered, "I don't know that."

There had been so little communication between these two—both because life at Stone Lodge went monotonously round like a piece of machinery which discouraged human interference, and because of the prohibition relative to Sissy's past career—that they were still almost strangers. Sissy, with her dark eyes wanderingly directed to Louisa's face, was uncertain whether to say more or to remain silent.

"You are more useful to my mother, and more pleasant

with her than I can ever be," Louisa resumed. "You are pleasanter to yourself, than *I* am to *my*self."

"But, if you please, Miss Louisa," Sissy pleaded, "I am—O so stupid!"

Louisa, with a brighter laugh than usual, told her she would be wiser by-and-bye.

"You don't know," said Sissy, half crying, "what a stupid girl I am. All through school hours I make mistakes. Mr. and Mrs. M'Choakumchild call me up, over and over again, regularly to make mistakes. I can't help them. They seem to come natural to me."

"Mr. and Mrs. M'Choakumchild never make any mistakes themselves, I suppose, Sissy?"

"O no!" she eagerly returned. "They know everything."

"Tell me some of your mistakes."

"I am almost ashamed," said Sissy, with reluctance. "But to-day, for instance, Mr. M'Choakumchild was explaining to us about Natural Prosperity."

"National, I think it must have been," observed Louisa.

"Yes, it was.—But isn't it the same?" she timidly asked.

"You had better say, National, as he said so," returned Louisa, with her dry reserve.

"National Prosperity. And he said, Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and a'n't you in a thriving state?"

"What did you say?" asked Louisa.

"Miss Louisa, I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all," said Sissy, wiping her eyes.

"That was a great mistake of yours," observed Louisa.

"Yes, Miss Louisa, I know it was, now. Then Mr. M'Choakumchild said he would try me again. And he said, This schoolroom is an immense town, and in it there are a million of inhabitants, and only five-and-twenty are starved to death in the streets, in the course of a year. What is your remark on that proportion? And my remark

was—for I couldn't think of a better one—that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million. And that was wrong, too."

"Of course it was."

"Then Mr. M'Choakumchild said he would try me once more. And he said, Here are the stutterings——"

"Statistics," said Louisa.

"Yes, Miss Louisa—they always remind me of stutterings, and that's another of my mistakes—of accidents upon the sea. And I find (Mr. M'Choakumchild said) that in a given time a hundred thousand persons went to sea on long voyages, and only five hundred of them were drowned or burnt to death. What is the percentage? And I said, Miss;" here Sissy fairly sobbed as confessing with extreme contrition to her greatest error; "I said it was nothing."

"Nothing, Sissy?"

"Nothing, Miss—to the relations and friends of the people who were killed. I shall never learn," said Sissy. "And the worst of all is, that although my poor father wished me so much to learn, and although I am so anxious to learn, because he wished me to, I am afraid I don't like it."

Louisa stood looking at the pretty modest head, as it drooped abashed before her, until it was raised again to glance at her face. Then she asked:

"Did your father know so much himself, that he wished you to be well taught too, Sissy?"

Sissy hesitated before replying, and so plainly showed her sense that they were entering on forbidden ground, that Louisa added, "No one hears us; and if any one did, I am sure no harm could be found in such an innocent question."

"No, Miss Louisa," answered Sissy, upon this encouragement, shaking her head; "father knows very little indeed. It's as much as he can do to write; and it's more than people in general can do to read his writing. Though it's plain to *me*."

"Your mother!"

"Father says she was quite a scholar. She died when I was born. She was;" Sissy made the terrible communication nervously; "she was a dancer."

"Did your father love her?" Louisa asked these ques-

tions with a strong, wild, wandering interest peculiar to her; an interest gone astray like a banished creature, and hiding in solitary places.

"O yes! As dearly as he loves me. Father loved me, first, for her sake. He carried me about with him when I was quite a baby. We have never been asunder from that time."

"Yet he leaves you now, Sissy?"

"Only for my good. Nobody understands him as I do; nobody knows him as I do. When he left me for my good —he never would have left me for his own—I know he was almost broken-hearted with the trial. He will not be happy for a single minute, till he comes back."

"Tell me more about him," said Louisa, "I will never ask you again. Where did you live?"

"We travelled about the country, and had no fixed place to live in. Father's a;" Sissy whispered the awful word, "a clown."

"To make the people laugh?" said Louisa, with a nod of intelligence.

"Yes. But they wouldn't laugh sometimes, and then father cried. Lately, they very often wouldn't laugh, and he used to come home despairing. Father's not like most. Those who didn't know him as well as I do, and didn't love him as dearly as I do, might believe he was not quite right. Sometimes they played tricks upon him; but they never knew how he felt them, and shrunk up, when he was alone with me. He was far, far timider than they thought!"

"And you were his comfort through everything?"

She nodded, with the tears rolling down her face. "I hope so, and father said I was. It was because he grew so scared and trembling, and because he felt himself to be a poor, weak, ignorant, helpless man (those used to be his words), that he wanted me so much to know a great deal, and be different from him. I used to read to him to cheer his courage, and he was very fond of that. They were wrong books—I am never to speak of them here—but we didn't know there was any harm in them."

"And he liked them?" said Louisa, with a searching gaze on Sissy all this time.

"O very much! They kept him, many times, from what did him real harm. And often and often of a night, he

used to forget all his troubles in wondering whether the Sultan would let the lady go on with the story, or would have her head cut off before it was finished."

"And your father was always kind? To the last?" asked Louisa; contravening the great principle, and wondering very much.

"Always, always!" returned Sissy, clasping her hands. "Kinder and kinder than I can tell. He was angry only one night, and that was not to me, but Merrylegs. Merrylegs;" she whispered the awful fact; "is his performing dog."

"Why was he angry with the dog?" Louisa demanded.

"Father, soon after they came home from performing, told Merrylegs to jump up on the backs of the two chairs and stand across them—which is one of his tricks He looked at father, and didn't do it at once. Everything of father's had gone wrong that night, and he hadn't pleased the public at all. He cried out that the very dog knew he was failing, and had no compassion on him. Then he beat the dog, and I was frightened, and said, 'Father, father! Pray don't hurt the creature who is so fond of you! O Heaven forgive you, father, stop!' And he stopped, and the dog was bloody, and father lay down crying on the floor with the dog in his arms, and the dog licked his face."

Louisa saw that she was sobbing; and going to her, kissed her, took her hand, and sat down beside her.

"Finish by telling me how your father left you, Sissy. Now that I have asked you so much, tell me the end. The blame, if there is any blame, is mine, not yours."

"Dear Miss Louisa," said Sissy, covering her eyes, and sobbing yet; "I came home from the school that afternoon, and found poor father just come home too, from the booth. And he sat rocking himself over the fire, as if he was in pain. And I said, 'Have you hurt yourself, father?' (as he did sometimes, like they all did), and he said, 'A little, my darling.' And when I came to stoop down and look up at his face, I saw that he was crying. The more I spoke to him, the more he hid his face; and at first he shook all over, and said nothing but 'My darling;' and 'My love!'"

Here Tom came lounging in, and stared at the two with a coolness not particularly savouring of interest in anything but himself, and not much of that at present.

"I am asking Sissy a few questions, Tom," observed his sister. "You have no occasion to go away; but don't interrupt us for a moment, Tom dear."

"Oh! very well!" returned Tom. "Only father has brought old Bounderby home, and I want you to come into the drawing-room. Because if you come, there's a good chance of old Bounderby's asking me to dinner; and if you don't, there's none."

"I'll come directly."

"I'll wait for you," said Tom, "to make sure."

Sissy resumed in a lower voice. "At last poor father said that he had given no satisfaction again, and never did give any satisfaction now, and that he was a shame and disgrace, and I should have done better without him all along. I said all the affectionate things to him that came into my heart, and presently he was quiet and I sat down by him, and told him all about the school and everything that had been said and done there. When I had no more left to tell, he put his arms round my neck, and kissed me a great many times. Then he asked me to fetch some of the stuff he used, for the little hurt he had had, and to get it at the best place, which was at the other end of town from there; and then, after kissing me again, he let me go. When I had gone downstairs, I turned back that I might be a little bit more company to him yet, and looked in at the door, and said, 'Father dear, shall I take Merrylegs?' Father shook his head and said, 'No, Sissy, no; take nothing that's known to be mine, my darling;' and I left him sitting by the fire. Then the thought must have come upon him, poor, poor father! of going away to try something for my sake; for when I came back, he was gone."

"I say! Look sharp for old Bounderby, Loo!" Tom remonstrated.

"There's no more to tell, Miss Louisa. I keep the nine oils ready for him, and I know he will come back. Every letter that I see in Mr. Gradgrind's hand takes my breath away and blinds my eyes, for I think it comes from father, or from Mr. Sleary about father. Mr. Sleary promised to write as soon as ever father should be heard of, and I trust to him to keep his word."

"Do look sharp for old Bounderby, Loo!" said Tom, with an impatient whistle. "He'll be off if you don't look sharp!"

After this, whenever Sissy dropped a curtsey to Mr. Gradgrind in the presence of his family, and said in a faltering way, "I beg your pardon, sir, for being troublesome —but—have you had any letter yet about me?" Louisa would suspend the occupation of the moment, whatever it was, and look for the reply as earnestly as Sissy did. And when Mr. Gradgrind regularly answered, "No, Jupe, nothing of the sort," the trembling of Sissy's lip would be repeated in Louisa's face, and her eyes would follow Sissy with compassion to the door. Mr. Gradgrind usually improved these occasions by remarking, when she was gone, that if Jupe had been properly trained from an early age she would have remonstrated to herself on sound principles the baselessness of these fantastic hopes. Yet it did seem (though not to him, for he saw nothing of it) as if fantastic hope could take as strong a hold as Fact.

This observation must be limited exclusively to his daughter. As to Tom, he was becoming that not unprecedented triumph of calculation which is usually at work on number one. As to Mrs. Gradgrind, if she said anything on the subject, she would come a little way out of her wrappers, like a feminine dormouse, and say:

"Good gracious bless me, how my poor head is vexed and worried by that girl Jupe's so perseveringly asking, over and over again, about her tiresome letters! Upon my word and honour I seem to be fated, and destined, and ordained, to live in the midst of things that I am never to hear the last of. It really is a most extraordinary circumstance that it appears as if I never was to hear the last of anything!"

At about this point, Mr. Gradgrind's eye would fall upon her; and under the influence of that wintry piece of fact, she would become torpid again.

CHAPTER X.

STEPHEN BLACKPOOL.

I ENTERTAIN a weak idea that the English people are as hard-worked as any people upon whom the sun shines. I acknowledge to this ridiculous idiosyncrasy, as a reason why I would give them a little more play.

In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man's purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes, as though every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in it; among the multitude of Coketown, generically called "the Hands,"—a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs—lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age.

Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life. It is said that every life has its roses and thorns; there seemed, however, to have been a misadventure or mistake in Stephen's case, whereby somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else's thorns in addition to his own.

He had known, to use his words, a peck of trouble. He was usually called Old Stephen, in a kind of rough homage to the fact. A rather stooping man, with a knitted brow, a pondering expression of face, and a hard-looking head sufficiently capacious, on which his iron-grey hair lay long and thin, Old Stephen might have passed for a particularly

intelligent man in his condition. Yet he was not. He took no place among those remarkable "Hands," who, piecing together their broken intervals of leisure through many years, had mastered difficult sciences, and acquired a knowledge of most unlikely things. He held no station among the Hands who could make speeches and carry on debates. Thousands of his compeers could talk much better than he, at any time. He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity. What more he was, or what else he had in him, if anything, let him show for himself.

The lights in the great factories, which looked, when they were illuminated, like Fairy palaces—or the travellers by express-train said so—were all extinguished; and the bells had rung for knocking off for the night, and had ceased again; and the Hands, men and women, boy and girl, were clattering home. Old Stephen was standing in the street, with the old sensation upon him which the stoppage of the machinery always produced—the sensation of its having worked and stopped in his own head.

"Yet I don't see Rachael, still!" said he.

It was a wet night, and many groups of young women passed him, with their shawls drawn over their bare heads and held close under their chins to keep the rain out. He knew Rachael well, for a glance at any one of these groups was sufficient to show him that she was not there. At last, there were no more to come; and then he turned away, saying in a tone of disappointment, "Why, then, I ha' missed her!"

But, he had not gone the length of three streets, when he saw another of the shawled figures in advance of him, at which he looked so keenly that perhaps its mere shadow indistinctly reflected on the wet pavement—if he could have seen it without the figure itself moving along from lamp to lamp, brightening and fading as it went—would have been enough to tell him who was there. Making his pace at once much quicker and much softer, he darted on until he was very near this figure, then fell into his former walk, and called "Rachael!"

She turned, being then in the brightness of a lamp; and raising her hood a little, showed a quiet oval face, dark and rather delicate, irradiated by a pair of very gentle eyes, and further set off by the perfect order of her shining

black hair. It was not a face in its first bloom; she was a woman five-and-thirty years of age.

"Ah, lad! 'Tis thou?" When she had said this, with a smile which would have been quite expressed, though nothing of her had been seen but her pleasant eyes, she replaced her hood again, and they went on together.

"I thought thou wast ahind me, Rachael!"

"No."

"Early t'night, lass?"

"'Times I'm a little early, Stephen! 'times a little late. I'm never to be counted on, going home."

"Nor going t'other way, neither, 't seems to me, Rachael?"

"No, Stephen."

He looked at her with some disappointment in his face, but with a respectful and patient conviction that she must be right in whatever she did. The expression was not lost upon her; she laid her hand lightly on his arm a moment as if to thank him for it.

"We are such true friends, lad, and such old friends, and getting to be such old folk, now."

"No, Rachael, thou'rt as young as ever thou wast."

"One of us would be puzzled how to get old, Stephen, without t'other getting so too, both being alive," she answered, laughing; "but, anyways, we're such old friends, that t'hide a word of honest truth fro' one another would be a sin and a pity. 'Tis better not to walk too much together. 'Times, yes! 'Twould be hard, indeed, if 'twas not to be at all," she said, with a cheerfulness she sought to communicate to him.

"'Tis hard, anyways, Rachael."

"Try to think not; and 'twill seem better."

"I've tried a long time, and 'ta'nt got better. But thou'rt right; 'tmight mak fok talk, even of thee. Thou hast been that to me, Rachael, through so many year: thou hast done me so much good, and heartened of me in that cheering way, that thy word is a law to me. Ah, lass, and a bright good law! Better than some real ones."

"Never fret about them, Stephen," she answered quickly, and not without an anxious glance at his face. "Let the laws be."

"Yes," he said, with a slow nod or two. "Let 'em be.

Let everything be. Let all sorts alone. 'Tis a muddle, and that's aw."

"Always a muddle?" said Rachael, with another gentle touch upon his arm, as if to recall him out of the thoughtfulness, in which he was biting the long ends of his loose neckerchief as he walked along. The touch had its instantaneous effect. He let them fall, turned a smiling face upon her, and said, as he broke into a good-humoured laugh, "Ay, Rachael, lass, awlus a muddle. That's where I stick. I come to the muddle many times and agen, and I never get beyond it."

They had walked some distance, and were near their own homes. The woman's was the first reached. It was in one of the many small streets for which the favourite undertaker (who turned a handsome sum out of the one poor ghastly pomp of the neighbourhood) kept a black ladder, in order that those who had done their daily groping up and down the narrow stairs might slide out of this working world by the windows. She stopped at the corner, and putting her hand in his, wished him good night.

"Good night, dear lass; good night!"

She went, with her neat figure and her sober womanly step, down the dark street, and he stood looking after her until she turned into one of the small houses. There was not a flutter of her coarse shawl, perhaps, but had its interest in this man's eyes; not a tone of her voice but had its echo in his innermost heart.

When she was lost to his view, he pursued his homeward way, glancing up sometimes at the sky, where the clouds were sailing fast and wildly. But, they were broken now, and the rain had ceased, and the moon shone,—looking down the high chimneys of Coketown on the deep furnaces below, and casting Titanic shadows of the steam engines at rest, upon the walls where they were lodged. The man seemed to have brightened with the night, as he went on.

His home, in such another street as the first, saving that it was narrower, was over a little shop. How it came to pass that any people found it worth their while to sell or buy the wretched little toys, mixed up in its window with cheap newspapers and pork (there was a leg to be raffled for to-morrow night), matters not here. He took his end of candle from a shelf, lighted it at another end of candle

on the counter, without disturbing the mistress of the shop who was asleep in her little room, and went upstairs into his lodging.

It was a room, not unacquainted with the black ladder under various tenants; but as neat, at present, as such a room could be. A few books and writings were on an old bureau in a corner, the furniture was decent and sufficient, and, though the atmosphere was tainted, the room was clean.

Going to the hearth to set the candle down upon a round three-legged table standing there, he stumbled against something. As he recoiled, looking down at it, it raised itself up into the form of a woman in a sitting attitude.

"Heaven's mercy, woman!" he cried, falling farther off from the figure. "Hast thou come back again!"

Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her.

After an impatient oath or two, and some stupid clawing of herself with the hand not necessary to her support, she got her hair away from her eyes sufficiently to obtain a sight of him. Then she sat swaying her body to and fro, and making gestures with her unnerved arm, which seemed intended as the accompaniment to a fit of laughter, though her face was stolid and drowsy.

"Eigh lad? What, yo'r there?" Some hoarse sounds meant for this, came mockingly out of her at last; and her head dropped forward on her breast.

"Back agen?" she screeched, after some minutes, as if he had that moment said it. "Yes! And back agen. Back agen ever and ever so often. Back? Yes, back. Why not?"

Roused by the unmeaning violence with which she cried it out, she scrambled up, and stood supporting herself with her shoulders against the wall; dangling in one hand by the string, a dunghill-fragment of a bonnet, and trying to look scornfully at him.

"I'll sell thee off again, and I'll sell thee off again, and

I'll sell thee off a score of times!" she cried, with something between a furious menace and an effort at a defiant dance. "Come awa' from th' bed!" He was sitting on the side of it, with his face hidden in his hands. "Come awa' from 't. 'Tis mine, and I've a right to 't!"

As she staggered to it, he avoided her with a shudder, and passed—his face still hidden—to the opposite end of the room. She threw herself upon the bed heavily, and soon was snoring hard. He sunk into a chair, and moved but once all that night. It was to throw a covering over her; as if his hands were not enough to hide her, even in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

NO WAY OUT.

The Fairy palaces burst into illumination, before pale morning showed the monstrous serpents of smoke trailing themselves over Coketown. A clattering of clogs upon the pavement; a rapid ringing of bells; and all the melancholy mad elephants, polished and oiled up for the day's monotony, were at their heavy exercise again.

Stephen bent over his loom, quiet, watchful, and steady. A special contrast, as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked, to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he laboured. Never fear, good people of an anxious turn of mind, that Art will consign Nature to oblivion. Set anywhere, side by side, the work of God and the work of man; and the former, even though it be a troop of Hands of very small account, will gain in dignity from the comparison.

So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions. There is no mystery in it; there is an unfathomable mystery in the meanest of them, for ever.—

Supposing we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects, and to govern these awful unknown quantities by other means!

The day grew strong, and showed itself outside, even against the flaming lights within. The lights were turned out, and the work went on. The rain fell, and the Smoke-serpents, submissive to the curse of all that tribe, trailed themselves upon the earth. In the waste-yard outside, the steam from the escape pipe, the litter of barrels and old iron, the shining heaps of coals, the ashes everywhere, were shrouded in a veil of mist and rain.

The work went on, until the noon-bell rang. More clattering upon the pavements. The looms, and wheels, and Hands all out of gear for an hour.

Stephen came out of the hot mill into the damp wind and cold wet streets, haggard and worn. He turned from his own class and his own quarter, taking nothing but a little bread as he walked along, towards the hill on which his principal employer lived, in a red house with black outside shutters, green inside blinds, a black street door, up two white steps, BOUNDERBY (in letters very like himself) upon a brazen plate, and a round brazen door-handle underneath it, like a brazen full-stop.

Mr. Bounderby was at his lunch. So Stephen had expected. Would his servant say that one of the Hands begged leave to speak to him? Message in return, requiring name of such Hand. Stephen Blackpool. There was nothing troublesome against Stephen Blackpool; yes, he might come in.

Stephen Blackpool in the parlour. Mr. Bounderby (whom he just knew by sight) at lunch on chop and sherry. Mrs. Sparsit netting at the fireside, in a side-saddle attitude, with one foot in a cotton stirrup. It was a part, at once of Mrs. Sparsit's dignity and service, not to lunch. She supervised the meal officially, but implied that in her own stately person she considered lunch a weakness.

"Now, Stephen," said Mr. Bounderby, "what's the matter with *you?*"

Stephen made a bow. Not a servile one—these Hands will never do that! Lord bless you, sir, you'll never catch them at that, if they have been with you twenty years!—and, as a complimentary toilet for Mrs. Sparsit, tucked his neckerchief ends into his waistcoat.

"Now, you know," said Mr. Bounderby, taking some sherry, "we have never had any difficulty with you, and you have never been one of the unreasonable ones. You don't expect to be set up in a coach and six, and to be fed on turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon, as a good many of 'em do!" Mr. Bounderby always represented this to be the sole, immediate, and direct object of any Hand who was not entirely satisfied; "and therefore I know already that you have not come here to make a complaint. Now, you know, I am certain of that, beforehand."

"No, sir, sure I ha' not coom for nowt o' th' kind."

Mr. Bounderby seemed agreeably surprised, notwithstanding his previous strong conviction. "Very well," he returned. "You're a steady Hand, and I was not mistaken. Now, let me hear what it's all about. As it's not that, let me hear what it is. What have you got to say? Out with it, lad!"

Stephen happened to glance towards Mrs. Sparsit "I can go, Mr. Bounderby, if you wish it," said that self-sacrificing lady, making a feint of taking her foot out of the stirrup.

Mr. Bounderby stayed her, by holding a mouthful of chop in suspension before swallowing it, and putting out his left hand. Then, withdrawing his hand and swallowing his mouthful of chop, he said to Stephen:

"Now you know, this good lady is a born lady, a high lady. You are not to suppose because she keeps my house for me, that she hasn't been very high up the tree—ah, up at the top of the tree! Now, if you have got anything to say that can't be said before a born lady, this lady will leave the room. If what you have got to say *can* be said before a born lady, this lady will stay where she is."

"Sir, I hope I never had nowt to say, not fitten for a born lady to year, sin' I were born mysen'," was the reply, accompanied with a slight flush.

"Very well," said Mr. Bounderby, pushing away his plate, and leaning back. "Fire away!"

"I ha' coom," Stephen began, raising his eyes from the floor, after a moment's consideration, "to ask yo yor advice. I need't overmuch. I were married on Eas'r Monday nineteen year sin, long and dree. She were a young lass—pretty enow—wi' good accounts of herseln. Well!

She went bad—soon. Not along of me. Gonnows I were not a unkind husband to her."

"I have heard all this before," said Mr. Bounderby. "She took to drinking, left off working, sold the furniture, pawned the clothes, and played old Gooseberry."

"I were patient wi' her."

("The more fool you, I think," said Mr. Bounderby, in confidence to his wine-glass.)

"I were very patient wi' her. I tried to wean her fra't ower and ower agen. I tried this, I tried that, I tried t'other. I ha' gone home, many's the time, and found all vanished as I had in the world, and her without a sense left to bless herseln lying on bare ground. I ha' dun't not once, not twice—twenty time!"

Every line in his face deepened as he said it, and put in its affecting evidence of the suffering he had undergone.

"From bad to worse, from worse to worsen. She left me. She disgraced herseln everyways, bitter and bad. She coom back, she coom back, she coom back. What could I do t' hinder her? I ha' walked the streets nights long, ere ever I'd go home. I ha' gone t' th' brigg, minded to fling myseln ower, and ha' no more on't. I ha' bore that much, that I were owd when I were young."

Mrs. Sparsit, easily ambling along with her netting-needles, raised the Coriolanian eyebrows and shook her head, as much as to say, "The great know trouble as well as the small. Please to turn your humble eye in My direction."

"I ha' paid her to keep awa' fra' me. These five year I ha' paid her. I ha' gotten decent fewtrils about me agen. I ha' lived hard and sad, but not ashamed and fearfo' a' the minnits o' my life. Last night, I went home. There she lay upon my har-stone! There she is!"

In the strength of his misfortune, and the energy of his distress, he fired for the moment like a proud man. In another moment, he stood as he had stood all the time—his usual stoop upon him; his pondering face addressed to Mr. Bounderby, with a curious expression on it, half shrewd, half perplexed, as if his mind were set upon unravelling something very difficult; his hat held tight in his left hand, which rested on his hip; his right arm, with a rugged propriety and force of action, very earnestly emphasising what he said: not least so when it always paused, a little bent, but not withdrawn, as he paused.

"I was acquainted with all this, you know," said Mr. Bounderby, "except the last clause, long ago. It's a bad job; that's what it is. You had better have been satisfied as you were, and not have got married. However, it's too late to say that."

"Was it an unequal marriage, sir, in point of years?" asked Mrs. Sparsit.

"You hear what this lady asks. Was it an unequal marriage in point of years, this unlucky job of yours?" said Mr. Bounderby.

"Not e'en so. I were one-and-twenty myseln; she were twenty nighbut."

"Indeed, sir?" said Mrs. Sparsit to her Chief, with great placidity. "I inferred, from its being so miserable a marriage, that it was probably an unequal one in point of years."

Mr. Bounderby looked very hard at the good lady in a sidelong way that had an odd sheepishness about it. He fortified himself with a little more sherry.

"Well? Why don't you go on?" he then asked, turning rather irritably on Stephen Blackpool.

"I ha' coom to ask yo, sir, how I am to be ridded o' this woman." Stephen infused a yet deeper gravity into the mixed expression of his attentive face. Mrs. Sparsit uttered a gentle ejaculation, as having received a moral shock.

"What do you mean?" said Bounderby, getting up to lean his back against the chimney-piece. "What are you talking about? You took her for better for worse."

"I mun' be ridden o' her. I cannot bear't nommore. I ha' lived under't so long, for that I ha' had'n the pity and comforting words o' th' best lass living or dead. Haply, but for her, I should ha' gone hottering mad."

"He wishes to be free, to marry the female of whom he speaks, I fear, sir," observed Mrs. Sparsit in an undertone, and much dejected by the immorality of the people.

"I do. The lady says what's right. I do. I were a coming to 't. I ha' read i' th' papers that great fok (fair faw 'em a'! I wishes 'em no hurt!) are not bonded together for better for worse so fast, but that they can be set free fro' *their* misfortnet marriages, an marry ower agen. When they dunnot agree, for that their tempers is ill-sorted, they has rooms o' one kind an another in their houses, above a bit, and they can live asunders. We fok ha' only one

room, and we can't. When that won't do, they ha' gowd an other cash, an they can say 'This for yo' an that for me,' an they can go their separate ways. We can't. Spite o' all that, they can be set free for smaller wrongs than mine. So, I mun' be ridden o' this woman, and I want t' know how?"

"No how," returned Mr. Bounderby.

"If I do her any hurt, sir, there's a law to punish me?"

"Of course there is."

"If I flee from her, there's a law to punish me?"

"Of course there is."

"If I marry t'oother dear lass, there's a law to punish me?"

"Of course there is."

"If I was to live wi' her and not marry her—saying such a thing could be, which it never could or would, an her so good—there's a law to punish me, in every innocent child belonging to me?"

"Of course there is."

"Now, a' God's name," said Stephen Blackpool, "show me the law to help me!"

"Hem! There's a sanctity in this relation of life," said Mr. Bounderby, "and—and—it must be kept up."

"No, no, dunnot say that, sir. 'Tan't kep' up that way. Not that way. 'Tis kep' down that way. I'm a weaver, I were in a fact'ry when a chilt, but I ha' gotten een to see wi' and eern to year wi'. I read in th' papers every 'Sizes, every Sessions—and you read too—I know it!—with dismay—how th' supposed unpossibility o' ever getting unchained from one another, at any price, on any terms, brings blood upon this land, and brings many common married fok to battle, murder, and sudden death. Let us ha' this, right understood. Mine's a grievous case, and I want —if yo will be so good—t' know the law that helps me."

"Now, I tell you what!" said Mr. Bounderby, putting his hands in his pockets. "There *is* such a law."

Stephen, subsiding into his quiet manner, and never wandering in his attention, gave a nod.

"But it's not for you at all. It costs money. It costs a mint of money."

"How much might that be?" Stephen calmly asked.

"Why, you'd have to go to Doctors' Commons with a suit, and you'd have to go to a court of Common Law with

a suit, and you'd have to go to the House of Lords with a suit, and you'd have to get an Act of Parliament to enable you to marry again, and it would cost you (if it was a case of very plain sailing), I suppose from a thousand to fifteen hundred pound," said Mr. Bounderby. "Perhaps twice the money."

"There's no other law?"

"Certainly not."

"Why then, sir," said Stephen, turning white, and motioning with that right hand of his, as if he gave everything to the four winds, "*'tis* a muddle. 'Tis just a muddle a'toogether, an the sooner I'm dead, the better."

(Mrs. Sparsit again dejected by the impiety of the people.)

"Pooh, pooh! Don't you talk nonsense, my good fellow," said Mr. Bounderby, "about things you don't understand; and don't you call the Institutions of your country a muddle, or you'll get yourself into a real muddle one of these fine mornings. The Institutions of your country are not your piece-work, and the only thing you have got to do, is, to mind your piece-work. You didn't take your wife for fast and for loose; but for better for worse. If she has turned out worse—why, all we have got to say is, she might have turned out better."

"'Tis a muddle," said Stephen, shaking his head as he moved to the door. "'Tis a' a muddle!"

"Now, I'll tell you what!" Mr. Bounderby resumed, as a valedictory address. "With what I shall call your unhallowed opinions, you have been quite shocking this lady: who, as I have already told you, is a born lady, and who, as I have not already told you, has had her own marriage misfortunes to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds —tens of Thousands of Pounds!" (he repeated it with great relish). "Now, you have always been a steady Hand hitherto; but my opinion is, and so I tell you plainly, that you are turning into the wrong road. You have been listening to some mischievous stranger or other—they're always about—and the best thing you can do is, to come out of that. Now you know;" here his countenance expressed marvellous acuteness; "I can see as far into a grindstone as another man; farther than a good many, perhaps, because I had my nose well kept to it when I was young. I see traces of the turtle soup, and venison, and

gold spoon in this. Yes, I do!" cried Mr. Bounderby, shaking his head with obstinate cunning. "By the Lord Harry, I do!"

With a very different shake of the head and deep sigh, Stephen said, "Thank you, sir, I wish you good day." So he left Mr. Bounderby swelling at his own portrait on the wall, as if he were going to explode himself into it; and Mrs. Sparsit still ambling on with her foot in her stirrup, looking quite cast down by the popular vices.

CHAPTER XII.

THE OLD WOMAN.

Old Stephen descended the two white steps, shutting the black door with the brazen door-plate, by the aid of the brazen full-stop, to which he gave a parting polish with the sleeve of his coat, observing that his hot hand clouded it. He crossed the street with his eyes bent upon the ground, and thus was walking sorrowfully away, when he felt a touch upon his arm.

It was not the touch he needed most at such a moment —the touch that could calm the wild waters of his soul, as the uplifted hand of the sublimest love and patience could abate the raging of the sea—yet it was a woman's hand too. It was an old woman, tall and shapely still, though withered by time, on whom his eyes fell when he stopped and turned. She was very cleanly and plainly dressed, had country mud upon her shoes, and was newly come from a journey. The flutter of her manner, in the unwonted noise of the streets; the spare shawl, carried unfolded on her arm; the heavy umbrella, and little basket; the loose long-fingered gloves, to which her hands were unused; all bespoke an old woman from the country, in her plain holiday clothes, come into Coketown on an expedition of rare occurrence. Remarking this at a glance, with the quick observation of his class, Stephen Blackpool bent his attentive face—his face, which, like the faces of many of his order, by dint of long working with eyes and hands in the midst of a prodigious noise, had acquired the concentrated

look with which we are familiar in the countenances of the deaf—the better to hear what she asked him.

"Pray, sir," said the old woman, "didn't I see you come out of that gentleman's house?" pointing back to Mr. Bounderby's. "I believe it was you, unless I have had the bad luck to mistake the person in following?"

"Yes, missus," returned Stephen, "it were me."

"Have you—you'll excuse an old woman's curiosity—have you seen the gentleman?"

"Yes, missus."

"And how did he look, sir? Was he portly, bold, outspoken, and hearty?" As she straightened her own figure, and held up her head in adapting her action to her words, the idea crossed Stephen that he had seen this old woman before, and had not quite liked her.

"O yes," he returned, observing her more attentively, "he were all that."

"And healthy," said the old woman, "as the fresh wind?"

"Yes," returned Stephen. "He were ett'n and drinking—as large and as loud as a Hummobee."

"Thank you!" said the old woman, with infinite content. "Thank you!"

He certainly never had seen this old woman before. Yet there was a vague remembrance in his mind, as if he had more than once dreamed of some old woman like her.

She walked along at his side, and, gently accommodating herself to her humour, he said Coketown was a busy place, was it not? to which she answered "Eigh sure! Dreadful busy!" Then he said, she came from the country, he saw? To which she answered in the affirmative.

"By Parliamentary, this morning. I came forty mile by Parliamentary this morning, and I'm going back the same forty mile this afternoon. I walked nine mile to the station this morning, and if I find nobody on the road to give me a lift, I shall walk the nine mile back to-night. That's pretty well, sir, at my age!" said the chatty old woman, her eye brightening with exultation.

"'Deed 'tis. Don't do't too often, missus."

"No, no. Once a year," she answered, shaking her head. "I spend my savings so, once every year. I come regular, to tramp about the streets, and see the gentlemen."

"Only to see 'em?" returned Stephen.

"That's enough for me," she replied, with great earnestness and interest of manner. "I ask no more! I have been standing about, on this side of the way, to see that gentleman," turning her head back towards Mr. Bounderby's again, "come out. But, he's late this year, and I have not seen him. You came out instead. Now, if I am obliged to go back without a glimpse of him—I only want a glimpse—well! I have seen you, and you have seen him, and I must make that do." Saying this, she looked at Stephen as if to fix his features in her mind, and her eye was not so bright as it had been.

With a large allowance for difference of tastes, and with all submission to the patricians of Coketown, this seemed so extraordinary a source of interest to take so much trouble about, that it perplexed him. But they were passing the church now, and as his eye caught the clock, he quickened his pace.

He was going to his work? the old woman said, quickening hers, too, quite easily. Yes, time was nearly out. On his telling her where he worked, the old woman became a more singular old woman than before.

"An't you happy?" she asked him.

"Why—there's awmost nobbody but has their troubles, missus." He answered evasively, because the old woman appeared to take it for granted that he would be very happy indeed, and he had not the heart to disappoint her. He knew that there was trouble enough in the world; and if the old woman had lived so long, and could count upon his having so little, why so much the better for her, and none the worse for him.

"Ay, ay! You have your troubles at home, you mean?" she said.

"Times. Just now and then," he answered, slightly.

"But, working under such a gentleman, they don't follow you to the Factory?"

No, no; they didn't follow him there, said Stephen. All correct there. Everything accordant there. (He did not go so far as to say, for her pleasure, that there was a sort of Divine Right there; but, I have heard claims almost as magnificent of late years.)

They were now in the black by-road near the place, and the Hands were crowding in. The bell was ringing, and the Serpent was a Serpent of many coils, and the Elephant

was getting ready. The strange old woman was delighted with the very bell. It was the beautifullest bell she had ever heard, she said, and sounded grand!

She asked him, when he stopped good-naturedly to shake hands with her before going in, how long he had worked there?

"A dozen year," he told her.

"I must kiss the hand," said she, "that has worked in this fine factory for a dozen year!" And she lifted it, though he would have prevented her, and put it to her lips. What harmony, besides her age and her simplicity, surrounded her, he did not know, but even in this fantastic action there was a something neither out of time nor place: a something which it seemed as if nobody else could have made as serious, or done with such a natural and touching air.

He had been at his loom full half an hour, thinking about this old woman, when, having occasion to move round the loom for its adjustment, he glanced through a window which was in his corner, and saw her still looking up at the pile of building, lost in admiration. Heedless of the smoke and mud and wet, and of her two long journeys, she was gazing at it, as if the heavy thrum that issued from its many stories were proud music to her.

She was gone by-and-bye, and the day went after her, and the lights sprung up again, and the Express whirled in full sight of the Fairy Palace over the arches near: little felt amid the jarring of the machinery, and scarcely heard above its crash and rattle. Long before then his thoughts had gone back to the dreary room above the little shop, and to the shameful figure heavy on the bed, but heavier on his heart.

Machinery slackened; throbbing feebly like a fainting pulse; stopped. The bell again; the glare of light and heat dispelled; the factories, looming heavy in the black wet night—their tall chimneys rising up into the air like competing Towers of Babel.

He had spoken to Rachael only last night, it was true, and had walked with her a little way; but he had his new misfortune on him, in which no one else could give him a moment's relief, and, for the sake of it, and because he knew himself to want that softening of his anger which no voice but hers could effect, he felt he might so far disre-

gard what she had said as to wait for her again. He waited, but she had eluded him. She was gone. On no other night in the year could he so ill have spared her patient face.

O! Better to have no home in which to lay his head, than to have a home and dread to go to it, through such a cause. He ate and drank, for he was exhausted—but he little knew or cared what: and he wandered about in the chill rain, thinking and thinking, and brooding and brooding.

No word of a new marriage had ever passed between them; but Rachael had taken great pity on him years ago, and to her alone he had opened his closed heart all this time, on the subject of his miseries; and he knew very well that if he were free to ask her, she would take him. He thought of the home he might at that moment have been seeking with pleasure and pride; of the different man he might have been that night; of the lightness then in his now heavy-laden breast; of the then restored honour, self-respect, and tranquillity all torn to pieces. He thought of the waste of the best part of his life, of the change it made in his character for the worse every day, of the dreadful nature of his existence, bound hand and foot, to a dead woman, and tormented by a demon in her shape. He thought of Rachael, how young when they were first brought together in these circumstances, how mature now, how soon to grow old. He thought of the number of girls and women she had seen marry, how many homes with children in them she had seen grow up around her, how she had contentedly pursued her own lone quiet path—for him—and how he had sometimes seen a shade of melancholy on her blessed face, that smote him with remorse and despair. He set the picture of her up, beside the infamous image of last night; and thought, Could it be, that the whole earthly course of one so gentle, good, and self-denying, was subjugate to such a wretch as that!

Filled with these thoughts—so filled that he had an unwholesome sense of growing larger, of being placed in some new and diseased relation towards the objects among which he passed, of seeing the iris round every misty light turn red—he went home for shelter.

CHAPTER XIII.

RACHAEL.

A CANDLE faintly burned in the window, to which the black ladder had often been raised for the sliding away of all that was most precious in this world to a striving wife and a brood of hungry babies; and Stephen added to his other thoughts the stern reflection, that of all the casualties of this existence upon earth, not one was dealt out with so unequal a hand as Death. The inequality of Birth was nothing to it. For, say that the child of a King and the child of a Weaver were born to-night in the same moment, what was that disparity, to the death of any human creature who was serviceable to, or beloved by, another, while this abandoned woman lived on!

From the outside of his home he gloomily passed to the inside, with suspended breath and with a slow footstep. He went up to his door, opened it, and so into the room.

Quiet and peace were there. Rachael was there, sitting by the bed.

She turned her head, and the light of her face shone in upon the midnight of his mind. She sat by the bed, watching and tending his wife. That is to say, he saw that some one lay there, and he knew too well it must be she; but Rachael's hands had put a curtain up, so that she was screened from his eyes. Her disgraceful garments were removed, and some of Rachael's were in the room. Everything was in its place and order as he had always kept it, the little fire was newly trimmed, and the hearth was freshly swept. It appeared to him that he saw all this in Rachael's face, and looked at nothing besides. While looking at it, it was shut out from his view by the softened tears that filled his eyes; but not before he had seen how earnestly she looked at him, and how her own eyes were filled too.

She turned again towards the bed, and satisfying herself that all was quiet there, spoke in a low, calm, cheerful voice.

"I am glad you have come at last, Stephen. You are very late."

"I ha' been walking up an' down."

"I thought so. But 'tis too bad a night for that. The rain falls very heavy, and the wind has risen."

The wind? True. It was blowing hard. Hark to the thundering in the chimney, and the surging noise! To have been out in such a wind, and not to have known it was blowing!

"I have been here once before, to-day, Stephen. Landlady came round for me at dinner-time. There was some one here that needed looking to, she said. And 'deed she was right. All wandering and lost, Stephen. Wounded too, and bruised."

He slowly moved to a chair and sat down, drooping his head before her.

"I came to do what little I could, Stephen; first, for that she worked with me when we were girls both, and that you courted her and married her when I was her friend—"

He laid his furrowed forehead on his hand, with a low groan.

"And next, for that I know your heart, and am right sure and certain that 'tis far too merciful to let her die, or even so much as suffer, for want of aid. Thou knowest who said, 'Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone at her!' There have been plenty to do that. Thou art not the man to cast the last stone, Stephen, when she is brought so low."

"O Rachael, Rachael!"

"Thou hast been a cruel sufferer, Heaven reward thee!" she said, in compassionate accents. "I am thy poor friend, with all my heart and mind."

The wounds of which she had spoken, seemed to be about the neck of the self-made outcast. She dressed them now, still without showing her. She steeped a piece of linen in a basin, into which she poured some liquid from a bottle, and laid it with a gentle hand upon the sore. The three-legged table had been drawn close to the bedside, and on it there were two bottles. This was one.

It was not so far off, but that Stephen, following her hands with his eyes, could read what was printed on it in large letters. He turned of a deadly hue, and a sudden horror seemed to fall upon him.

"I will stay here, Stephen," said Rachael, quietly re-

suming her seat, "till the bells go Three. 'Tis to be done again at three, and then she may be left till morning."

"But thy rest agen to-morrow's work, my dear."

"I slept sound last night. I can wake many nights, when I am put to it. 'Tis thou who art in need of rest—so white and tired. Try to sleep in the chair there, while I watch. Thou hadst no sleep last night, I can well believe. To-morrow's work is far harder for thee than for me."

He heard the thundering and surging out of doors, and it seemed to him as if his late angry mood were going about trying to get at him. She had cast it out; she would keep it out; he trusted to her to defend him from himself.

"She don't know me, Stephen; she just drowsily mutters and stares. I have spoken to her times and again, but she don't notice! 'Tis as well so. When she comes to her right mind once more, I shall have done what I can, and she never the wiser."

"How long, Rachael, is't looked for, that she'll be so?"

"Doctor said she would haply come to her mind to-morrow."

His eyes fell again on the bottle, and a tremble passed over him, causing him to shiver in every limb. She thought he was chilled with the wet. "No," he said, "it was not that. He had had a fright."

"A fright?"

"Ay, ay! coming in. When I were walking. When I were thinking. When I—" It seized him again; and he stood up, holding by the mantel-shelf, as he pressed his dank cold hair down with a hand that shook as if it were palsied.

"Stephen!"

She was coming to him, but he stretched out his arm to stop her.

"No! Don't, please; don't. Let me see thee setten by the bed. Let me see thee, a' so good, and so forgiving. Let me see thee as I see thee when I coom in. I can never see thee better than so. Never, never, never!"

He had a violent fit of trembling, and then sunk into his chair. After a time he controlled himself, and, resting with an elbow on one knee, and his head upon that hand, could look towards Rachael. Seen across the dim candle

with his moistened eyes, she looked as if she had a glory shining round her head. He could have believed she had. He did believe it, as the noise without shook the window, rattled at the door below, and went about the house clamouring and lamenting.

"When she gets better, Stephen, 'tis to be hoped she'll leave thee to thyself again, and do thee no more hurt. Anyways we will hope so now. And now I shall keep silence, for I want thee to sleep."

He closed his eyes, more to please her than to rest his weary head; but, by slow degrees as he listened to the great noise of the wind, he ceased to hear it, or it changed into the working of his loom, or even into the voices of the day (his own included) saying what had been really said. Even this imperfect consciousness faded away at last, and he dreamed a long, troubled dream.

He thought that he, and some one on whom his heart had long been set—but she was not Rachael, and that surprised him, even in the midst of his imaginary happiness—stood in the church being married. While the ceremony was performing, and while he recognised among the witnesses some whom he knew to be living, and many whom he knew to be dead, darkness came on, succeeded by the shining of a tremendous light. It broke from one line in the table of commandments at the altar, and illuminated the building with the words. They were sounded through the church, too, as if there were voices in the fiery letters. Upon this, the whole appearance before him and around him changed, and nothing was left as it had been, but himself and the clergyman. They stood in the daylight before a crowd so vast, that if all the people in the world could have been brought together into one space, they could not have looked, he thought, more numerous; and they all abhorred him, and there was not one pitying or friendly eye among the millions that were fastened on his face. He stood on a raised stage, under his own loom; and, looking up at the shape the loom took, and hearing the burial service distinctly read, he knew that he was there to suffer death. In an instant what he stood on fell below him, and he was gone.

Out of what mystery he came back to his usual life, and to places that he knew, he was unable to consider; but he was back in those places by some means, and with this con-

demnation upon him, that he was never, in this world or the next, through all the unimaginable ages of eternity, to look on Rachael's face or hear her voice. Wandering to and fro, unceasingly, without hope, and in search of he knew not what (he only knew that he was doomed to seek it), he was the subject of a nameless, horrible dread, a mortal fear of one particular shape which everything took. Whatsoever he looked at, grew into that form sooner or later. The object of his miserable existence was to prevent its recognition by any one among the various people he encountered. Hopeless labour! If he led them out of rooms where it was, if he shut up drawers and closets where it stood, if he drew the curious from places where he knew it to be secreted, and got them out into the streets, the very chimneys of the mills assumed that shape, and round them was the printed word.

The wind was blowing again, the rain was beating on the housetops, and the larger spaces through which he had strayed contracted to the four walls of his room. Saving that the fire had died out, it was as his eyes had closed upon it. Rachael seemed to have fallen into a doze, in the chair by the bed. She sat wrapped in her shawl, perfectly still. The table stood in the same place, close by the bedside, and on it, in its real proportions and appearance, was the shape so often repeated.

He thought he saw the curtain move. He looked again, and he was sure it moved. He saw a hand come forth and grope about a little. Then the curtain moved more perceptibly, and the woman in the bed put it back, and sat up.

With her woful eyes, so haggard and wild, so heavy and large, she looked all round the room, and passed the corner where he slept in his chair. Her eyes returned to that corner, and she put her hand over them as a shade, while she looked into it. Again they went all round the room, scarcely heeding Rachael if at all, and returned to that corner. He thought, as she once more shaded them—not so much looking at him, as looking for him with a brutish instinct that he was there—that no single trace was left in those debauched features, or in the mind that went along with them, of the woman he had married eighteen years before. But that he had seen her come to this by inches, he never could have believed her to be the same.

All this time, as if a spell were on him, he was motionless and powerless, except to watch her.

Stupidly dozing, or communing with her incapable self about nothing, she sat for a little while with her hands at her ears, and her head resting on them. Presently, she resumed her staring round the room. And now, for the first time, her eyes stopped at the table with the bottles on it.

Straightway she turned her eyes back to his corner, with the defiance of last night, and moving very cautiously and softly, stretched out her greedy hand. She drew a mug into the bed, and sat for a while considering which of the two bottles she should choose. Finally, she laid her insensate grasp upon the bottle that had swift and certain death in it, and, before his eyes, pulled out the cork with her teeth.

Dream or reality, he had no voice, nor had he power to stir. If this be real, and her allotted time be not yet come, wake, Rachael, wake!

She thought of that, too. She looked at Rachael, and very slowly, very cautiously, poured out the contents. The draught was at her lips. A moment and she would be past all help, let the whole world wake and come about her with its utmost power. But in that moment Rachael started up with a suppressed cry. The creature struggled, struck her, seized her by the hair; but Rachael had the cup.

Stephen broke out of his chair. "Rachael, am I wakin' or dreamin' this dreadfo' night?"

"'Tis all well, Stephen. I have been asleep myself. 'Tis near three. Hush! I hear the bells."

The wind brought the sound of the church clock to the window. They listened, and it struck three. Stephen looked at her, saw how pale she was, noted the disorder of her hair, and the red marks of fingers on her forehead, and felt assured that his senses of sight and hearing had been awake. She held the cup in her hand even now.

"I thought it must be near three," she said, calmly pouring from the cup into the basin, and steeping the linen as before. "I am thankful I stayed! 'Tis done now, when I have put this on. There! And now she's quiet again. The few drops in the basin I'll pour away, for 'tis bad stuff to leave about, though ever so little of it." As she spoke, she drained the basin into the ashes of the fire, and broke the bottle on the hearth.

She had nothing to do, then, but to cover herself with her shawl before going out into the wind and rain.

"Thou'lt let me walk wi' thee at this hour, Rachael?"

"No, Stephen. 'Tis but a minute, and I'm home."

"Thou'rt not fearfo';" he said it in a low voice, as they went out at the door; "to leave me alone wi' her!"

As she looked at him, saying, "Stephen?" he went down on his knee before her, on the poor mean stairs, and put an end of her shawl to his lips.

"Thou art an Angel. Bless thee, bless thee!"

"I am, as I have told thee, Stephen, thy poor friend. Angels are not like me. Between them, and a working woman fu' of faults, there is a deep gulf set. My little sister is among them, but she is changed."

She raised her eyes for a moment as she said the words; and then they fell again, in all their gentleness and mildness, on his face.

"Thou changest me from bad to good. Thou mak'st me humbly wishfo' to be more like thee, and fearfo' to lose thee when this life is ower, and a' the muddle cleared awa'. Thou'rt an Angel; it may be, thou hast saved my soul alive!"

She looked at him, on his knee at her feet, with her shawl still in his hand, and the reproof on her lips died away when she saw the working of his face.

"I coom home desp'rate. I coom home wi'out a hope, and mad wi' thinking that when I said a word o' complaint I was reckoned a onreasonable Hand. I told thee I had had a fright. It were the Poison-bottle on table. I never hurt a livin' creetur; but happenin' so suddenly upon 't, I thowt, 'How can *I* say what I might ha' done to myseln, or her, or both!'"

She put her two hands on his mouth, with a face of terror, to stop him from saying more. He caught them in his unoccupied hand, and holding them, and still clasping the border of her shawl, said hurriedly:

"But I see thee, Rachael, setten by the bed. I ha' seen thee, aw this night. In my troublous sleep I ha' known thee still to be there. Evermore I will see thee there. I nevermore will see her or think o' her, but thou shalt be beside her. I nevermore will see or think o' anything that angers me, but thou, so much better than me, shalt be by th' side on't. And so I will try t' look t' th' time, and so

I will try t' trust t' th' time, when thou and me at last shall walk together far awa', beyond the deep gulf, in th' country where thy little sister is."

He kissed the border of her shawl again, and let her go. She bade him good night in a broken voice, and went out into the street.

The wind blew from the quarter where the day would soon appear, and still blew strongly. It had cleared the sky before it, and the rain had spent itself or travelled elsewhere, and the stars were bright. He stood bareheaded in the road, watching her quick disappearance. As the shining stars were to the heavy candle in the window, so was Rachael, in the rugged fancy of this man, to the common experiences of his life.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GREAT MANUFACTURER.

Time went on in Coketown like its own machinery: so much material wrought up, so much fuel consumed, so many powers worn out, so much money made. But, less inexorable than iron, steel, and brass, it brought its varying seasons even into that wilderness of smoke and brick, and made the only stand that ever *was* made in the place against its direful uniformity.

"Louisa is becoming," said Mr. Gradgrind, "almost a young woman."

Time with his innumerable horse-power, worked away, not minding what anybody said, and presently turned out young Thomas a foot taller than when his father had last taken particular notice of him.

"Thomas is becoming," said Mr. Gradgrind, "almost a young man."

Time passed Thomas on in the mill, while his father was thinking about it, and there he stood in a long-tailed coat and a stiff shirt-collar.

"Really," said Mr. Gradgrind, "the period has arrived when Thomas ought to go to Bounderby."

Time, sticking to him, passed him on into Bounderby's bank, made him an inmate of Bounderby's house, necessi-

tated the purchase of his first razor, and exercised him diligently in his calculations relative to number one.

The same great manufacturer, always with an immense variety of work on hand, in every stage of development, passed Sissy onward in his mill, and worked her up into a very pretty article indeed.

"I fear, Jupe," said Mr. Gradgrind, "that your continuance at the school any longer would be useless."

"I am afraid it would, sir," Sissy answered with a curtsey.

"I cannot disguise from you, Jupe," said Mr. Gradgrind, knitting his brow, "that the result of your probation there has disappointed me; has greatly disappointed me. You have not acquired, under Mr. and Mrs. M'Choakumchild, anything like that amount of exact knowledge which I looked for. You are extremely deficient in your facts. Your acquaintance with figures is very limited. You are altogether backward, and below the mark."

"I am sorry, sir," she returned; "but I know it is quite true. Yet I have tried hard, sir."

"Yes," said Mr. Gradgrind, "yes, I believe you have tried hard; I have observed you, and I can find no fault in that respect."

"Thank you, sir. I have thought sometimes;" Sissy very timid here; "that perhaps I tried to learn too much, and that if I had asked to be allowed to try a little less, I might have——"

"No, Jupe, no," said Mr. Gradgrind, shaking his head in his profoundest and most eminently practical way. "No. The course you pursued, you pursued according to the system—the system—and there is no more to be said about it. I can only suppose that the circumstances of your early life were too unfavourable to the development of your reasoning powers, and that we began too late. Still, as I have said already, I am disappointed."

"I wish I could have made a better acknowledgment, sir, of your kindness to a poor forlorn girl who had no claim upon you, and of your protection of her."

"Don't shed tears," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Don't shed tears. I don't complain of you. You are an affectionate, earnest, good young woman—and—and we must make that do."

"Thank you, sir, very much," said Sissy, with a grateful curtsey.

"You are useful to Mrs. Gradgrind, and (in a generally pervading way) you are serviceable in the family also; so I understand from Miss Louisa, and, indeed, so I have observed myself. I therefore hope," said Mr. Gradgrind, "that you can make yourself happy in those relations."

"I should have nothing to wish, sir, if——"

"I understand you," said Mr. Gradgrind; "you still refer to your father. I have heard from Miss Louisa that you still preserve that bottle. Well! If your training in the science of arriving at exact results had been more successful, you would have been wiser on these points. I will say no more."

He really liked Sissy too well to have a contempt for her; otherwise he held her calculating powers in such very slight estimation that he must have fallen upon that conclusion. Somehow or other, he had become possessed by an idea that there was something in this girl which could hardly be set forth in a tabular form. Her capacity of definition might be easily stated at a very low figure, her mathematical knowledge at nothing; yet he was not sure that if he had been required, for example, to tick her off into columns in a parliamentary return, he would have quite known how to divide her.

In some stages of his manufacture of the human fabric, the processes of Time are very rapid. Young Thomas and Sissy being both at such a stage of their working up, these changes were effected in a year or two; while Mr. Gradgrind himself seemed stationary in his course, and underwent no alteration.

Except one, which was apart from his necessary progress through the mill. Time hustled him into a little noisy and rather dirty machinery, in a by-corner, and made him Member of Parliament for Coketown: one of the respected members for ounce weights and measures, one of the representatives of the multiplication table, one of the deaf honourable gentlemen, dumb honourable gentlemen, blind honourable gentlemen, lame honourable gentlemen, dead honourable gentlemen, to every other consideration. Else wherefore live we in a Christian land, eighteen hundred and odd years after our Master?

All this while, Louisa had been passing on, so quiet and reserved, and so much given to watching the bright ashes at twilight as they fell into the grate and became extinct,

that from the period when her father had said she was almost a young woman—which seemed but yesterday—she had scarcely attracted his notice again, when he found her quite a young woman.

"Quite a young woman," said Mr. Gradgrind, musing. "Dear me!"

Soon after this discovery, he became more thoughtful than usual for several days, and seemed much engrossed by one subject. On a certain night, when he was going out, and Louisa came to bid him good bye before his departure —as he was not to be home until late and she would not see him again until the morning—he held her in his arms, looking at her in his kindest manner, and said:

"My dear Louisa, you are a woman!"

She answered with the old, quick, searching look of the night when she was found at the Circus; then cast down her eyes. "Yes, father."

"My dear," said Mr. Gradgrind, "I must speak with you alone and seriously. Come to me in my room after breakfast to-morrow, will you?"

"Yes, father."

"Your hands are rather cold, Louisa. Are you not well?"

"Quite well, father."

"And cheerful?"

She looked at him again, and smiled in her peculiar manner. "I am as cheerful, father, as I usually am, or usually have been."

"That's well," said Mr. Gradgrind. So, he kissed her and went away; and Louisa returned to the serene apartment of the hair-cutting character, and leaning her elbow on her hand, looked again at the short-lived sparks that so soon subsided into ashes.

"Are you there, Loo?" said her brother, looking in at the door. He was quite a young gentleman of pleasure now, and not quite a prepossessing one.

"Dear Tom," she answered, rising and embracing him, "how long it is since you have been to see me!"

"Why, I have been otherwise engaged, Loo, in the evenings; and in the daytime old Bounderby has been keeping me at it rather. But I touch him up with you when he comes it too strong, and so we preserve an understanding. I say! Has father said anything particular to you to-day or yesterday, Loo?"

"No, Tom. But he told me to-night that he wished to do so in the morning."

"Ah! That's what I mean," said Tom. "Do you know where he is to-night?"—with a very deep expression.

"No."

"Then I'll tell you. He's with old Bounderby. They are having a regular confab together up at the Bank. Why at the Bank, do you think? Well, I'll tell you again. To keep Mrs. Sparsit's ears as far off as possible, I expect."

With her hand upon her brother's shoulder, Louisa still stood looking at the fire. Her brother glanced at her face with greater interest than usual, and, encircling her waist with his arm, drew her coaxingly to him.

"You are very fond of me, an't you, Loo?"

"Indeed I am, Tom, though you do let such long intervals go by without coming to see me."

"Well, sister of mine," said Tom, "when you say that, you are near my thoughts. We might be so much oftener together—mightn't we? Always together, almost—mightn't we? It would do me a great deal of good if you were to make up your mind to I know what, Loo. It would be a splendid thing for me. It would be uncommonly jolly!"

Her thoughtfulness baffled his cunning scrutiny. He could make nothing of her face. He pressed her in his arm, and kissed her cheek. She returned the kiss, but still looked at the fire.

"I say, Loo! I thought I'd come, and just hint to you what was going on: though I supposed you'd most likely guess, even if you didn't know. I can't stay, because I'm engaged to some fellows to-night. You won't forget how fond you are of me?"

"No, dear Tom, I won't forget."

"That's a capital girl," said Tom. "Good bye, Loo."

She gave him an affectionate good night, and went out with him to the door, whence the fires of Coketown could be seen, making the distance lurid. She stood there, looking steadfastly towards them, and listening to his departing steps. They retreated quickly, as glad to get away from Stone Lodge; and she stood there yet, when he was gone and all was quiet. It seemed as if, first in her own fire within the house, and then in the fiery haze without, she tried to discover what kind of woof Old Time, that greatest

and longest-established Spinner of all, would weave from the threads he had already spun into a woman. But his factory is a secret place, his work is noiseless, and his Hands are mutes.

CHAPTER XV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Gradgrind did not take after Blue Beard, his room was quite a blue chamber in its abundance of blue books. Whatever they could prove (which is usually anything you like), they proved there, in an army constantly strengthening by the arrival of new recruits. In that charmed apartment, the most complicated social questions were cast up, got into exact totals, and finally settled—if those concerned could only have been brought to know it. As if an astronomical observatory should be made without any windows, and the astronomer within should arrange the starry universe solely by pen, ink, and paper, so Mr. Gradgrind, in *his* Observatory (and there are many like it) had no need to cast an eye upon the teeming myriads of human beings around him, but could settle all their destinies on a slate, and wipe out all their tears with one dirty little bit of sponge.

To this Observatory, then: a stern room, with a deadly statistical clock in it, which measured every second with a beat like a rap upon a coffin-lid; Louisa repaired on the appointed morning. A window looked towards Coketown; and when she sat down near her father's table, she saw the high chimneys and the long tracts of smoke looming in the heavy distance gloomily.

"My dear Louisa," said her father, "I prepared you last night to give me your serious attention in the conversation we are now going to have together. You have been so well trained, and you do, I am happy to say, so much justice to the education you have received, that I have perfect confidence in your good sense. You are not impulsive, you are not romantic, you are accustomed to view everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason and calculation. From that ground alone, I know you will view and consider what I am going to communicate."

He waited, as if he would have been glad that she said something. But she said never a word.

"Louisa, my dear, you are the subject of a proposal of marriage that has been made to me."

Again he waited, and again she answered not one word. This so far surprised him, as to induce him gently to repeat, "a proposal of marriage, my dear." To which she returned, without any visible emotion whatever:

"I hear you, father. I am attending, I assure you."

"Well!" said Mr. Gradgrind, breaking into a smile, after being for the moment at a loss, "you are even more dispassionate than I expected, Louisa. Or, perhaps, you are not unprepared for the announcement I have it in charge to make?"

"I cannot say that, father, until I hear it. Prepared or unprepared, I wish to hear it all from you. I wish to hear you state it to me, father."

Strange to relate, Mr. Gradgrind was not so collected at this moment as his daughter was. He took a paper-knife in his hand, turned it over, laid it down, took it up again, and even then had to look along the blade of it, considering how to go on.

"What you say, my dear Louisa, is perfectly reasonable. I have undertaken then to let you know that——in short, that Mr. Bounderby has informed me that he has long watched your progress with particular interest and pleasure, and has long hoped that the time might ultimately arrive when he should offer you his hand in marriage. That time, to which he has so long, and certainly with great constancy, looked forward, is now come. Mr. Bounderby has made his proposal of marriage to me, and has entreated me to make it known to you, and to express his hope that you will take it into your favourable consideration."

Silence between them. The deadly statistical clock very hollow. The distant smoke very black and heavy.

"Father," said Louisa, "do you think I love Mr. Bounderby?"

Mr. Gradgrind was extremely discomfited by this unexpected question. "Well, my child," he returned, "I—really—cannot take upon myself to say."

"Father," pursued Louisa in exactly the same voice as before, "do you ask me to love Mr. Bounderby?"

"My dear Louisa, no. No. I ask nothing."

"Father," she still pursued, "does Mr. Bounderby ask me to love him?"

"Really, my dear," said Mr. Gradgrind, "it is difficult to answer your question—"

"Difficult to answer it, Yes or No, father?"

"Certainly, my dear. Because;" here was something to demonstrate, and it set him up again; "because the reply depends so materially, Louisa, on the sense in which we use the expression. Now, Mr. Bounderby does not do you the injustice, and does not do himself the injustice, of pretending to anything fanciful, fantastic, or (I am using synonymous terms) sentimental. Mr. Bounderby would have seen you grow up under his eyes, to very little purpose, if he could so far forget what is due to your good sense, not to say to his, as to address you from any such ground. Therefore, perhaps the expression itself—I merely suggest this to you, my dear—may be a little misplaced."

"What would you advise me to use in its stead, father?"

"Why, my dear Louisa," said Mr. Gradgrind, completely recovered by this time, "I would advise you (since you ask me) to consider this question, as you have been accustomed to consider every other question, simply as one of tangible Fact. The ignorant and the giddy may embarrass such subjects with irrelevant fancies, and other absurdities that have no existence, properly viewed—really no existence—but it is no compliment to you to say, that you know better. Now, what are the Facts of this case? You are, we will say in round numbers, twenty years of age; Mr. Bounderby is, we will say in round numbers, fifty. There is some disparity in your respective years, but in your means and positions there is none; on the contrary, there is a great suitability. Then the question arises, Is this one disparity sufficient to operate as a bar to such a marriage? In considering this question, it is not unimportant to take into account the statistics of marriage, so far as they have yet been obtained, in England and Wales. I find, on reference to the figures, that a large proportion of these marriages are contracted between parties of very unequal ages, and that the elder of these contracting parties is, in rather more than three-fourths of these instances, the bridegroom. It is remarkable as showing the wide prevalence of this law, that among the natives of the British possessions in India, also in a considerable part of China, and among the Calmucks

of Tartary, the best means of computation yet furnished us by travellers, yield similar results. The disparity I have mentioned, therefore, almost ceases to be disparity, and (virtually) all but disappears."

"What do you recommend, father," asked Louisa, her reserved composure not in the least affected by these gratifying results, "that I should substitute for the term I used just now? For the misplaced expression?"

"Louisa," returned her father, "it appears to me that nothing can be plainer. Confining yourself rigidly to Fact, the question of Fact you state to yourself is: Does Mr. Bounderby ask me to marry him? Yes, he does. The sole remaining question then is: Shall I marry him? I think nothing can be plainer than that?"

"Shall I marry him?" repeated Louisa, with great deliberation.

"Precisely. And it is satisfactory to me, as your father, my dear Louisa, to know that you do not come to the consideration of that question with the previous habits of mind, and habits of life, that belong to many young women."

"No, father," she returned, "I do not."

"I now leave you to judge for yourself," said Mr. Gradgrind. "I have stated the case, as such cases are usually stated among practical minds; I have stated it, as the case of your mother and myself was stated in its time. The rest, my dear Louisa, is for you to decide."

From the beginning, she had sat looking at him fixedly. As he now leaned back in his chair, and bent his deep-set eyes upon her in his turn, perhaps he might have seen one wavering moment in her, when she was impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart. But, to see it, he must have overleaped at a bound the artificial barriers he had for many years been erecting, between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity which will elude the utmost cunning of algebra until the last trumpet ever to be sounded shall blow even algebra to wreck. The barriers were too many and too high for such a leap. With his unbending, utilitarian, matter-of-fact face, he hardened her again; and the moment shot away into the plumbless depth of the past, to mingle with all the lost opportunities that are drowned there.

Removing her eyes from him, she sat so long looking

silently towards the town, that he said, at length: "Are you consulting the chimneys of the Coketown works, Louisa?"

"There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!" she answered, turning quickly.

"Of course I know that, Louisa. I do not see the application of the remark." To do him justice he did not, at all.

She passed it away with a slight motion of her hand, and concentrating her attention upon him again, said, "Father, I have often thought that life is very short."—This was so distinctly one of his subjects that he interposed.

"It is short, no doubt, my dear. Still, the average duration of human life is proved to have increased of late years. The calculations of various life assurance and annuity offices, among other figures which cannot go wrong, have established the fact."

"I speak of my own life, father."

"O indeed? Still," said Mr. Gradgrind, "I need not point out to you, Louisa, that it is governed by the laws which govern lives in the aggregate."

"While it lasts, I would wish to do the little I can, and the little I am fit for. What does it matter?"

Mr. Gradgrind seemed rather at a loss to understand the last four words; replying, "How, matter? What matter, my dear?"

"Mr. Bounderby," she went on in a steady, straight way, without regarding this, "asks me to marry him. The question I have to ask myself is, shall I marry him? That is so, father, is it not? You have told me so, father. Have you not?"

"Certainly, my dear."

"Let it be so. Since Mr. Bounderby likes to take me thus, I am satisfied to accept his proposal. Tell him, father, as soon as you please, that this was my answer. Repeat it, word for word, if you can, because I should wish him to know what I said."

"It is quite right, my dear," retorted her father approvingly, "to be exact. I will observe your very proper request. Have you any wish in reference to the period of your marriage, my child?"

"None, father. What does it matter!"

Mr. Gradgrind had drawn his chair a little nearer to her,

and taken her hand. But, her repetition of these words seemed to strike with some little discord on his ear. He paused to look at her, and, still holding her hand, said:

"Louisa, I have not considered it essential to ask you one question, because the possibility implied in it appeared to me to be too remote. But perhaps I ought to do so. You have never entertained in secret any other proposal?"

"Father," she returned, almost scornfully, "what other proposal can have been made to *me?* Whom have I seen? Where have *I* been? What are my heart's experiences?"

"My dear Louisa," returned Mr. Gradgrind, reassured and satisfied. "You correct me justly. I merely wished to discharge my duty."

"What do *I* know, father," said Louisa in her quiet manner, "of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?" As she said it, she unconsciously closed her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash.

"My dear," assented her eminently practical parent, "quite true, quite true."

"Why, father," she pursued, "what a strange question to ask *me!* The baby-preference that even I have heard of as common among children, has never had its innocent resting-place in my breast. You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart. You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child's dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear."

Mr. Gradgrind was quite moved by his success, and by this testimony to it. "My dear Louisa," said he, "you abundantly repay my care. Kiss me, my dear girl."

So, his daughter kissed him. Detaining her in his embrace, he said, "I may assure you now, my favourite child, that I am made happy by the sound decision at which you have arrived. Mr. Bounderby is a very remarkable man; and what little disparity can be said to exist between you —if any—is more than counterbalanced by the tone your mind has acquired. It has always been my object so to educate you, as that you might, while still in your early

youth, be (if I may so express myself) almost any age. Kiss me once more, Louisa. Now, let us go and find your mother."

Accordingly, they went down to the drawing-room, where the esteemed lady with no nonsense about her, was recumbent as usual, while Sissy worked beside her. She gave some feeble signs of returning animation when they entered, and presently the faint transparency was presented in a sitting attitude.

"Mrs. Gradgrind," said her husband, who had waited for the achievement of this feat with some impatience, "allow me to present to you Mrs. Bounderby."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Gradgrind, "so you have settled it! Well, I'm sure I hope your health may be good, Louisa; for if your head begins to split as soon as you are married, which was the case with mine, I cannot consider that you are to be envied, though I have no doubt you think you are, as all girls do. However, I give you joy, my dear—and I hope you may now turn all your ological studies to good account, I am sure I do! I must give you a kiss of congratulation, Louisa; but don't touch my right shoulder, for there's something running down it all day long. And now you see," whimpered Mrs. Gradgrind, adjusting her shawls after the affectionate ceremony, "I shall be worrying myself, morning, noon, and night, to know what I am to call him!"

"Mrs. Gradgrind," said her husband, solemnly, "what do you mean?"

"Whatever I am to call him, Mr. Gradgrind, when he is married to Louisa! I must call him something. It's impossible," said Mrs. Gradgrind, with a mingled sense of politeness and injury, "to be constantly addressing him and never giving him a name. I cannot call him Josiah, for the name is insupportable to me. You yourself wouldn't hear of Joe, you very well know. Am I to call my own son-in-law, Mister. Not, I believe, unless the time has arrived when, as an invalid, I am to be trampled upon by my relations. Then, what am I to call him!"

Nobody present having any suggestion to offer in the remarkable emergency, Mrs. Gradgrind departed this life for the time being, after delivering the following codicil to her remarks already executed:

"As to the wedding, all I ask, Louisa, is,—and I ask it

with a fluttering in my chest, which actually extends to the soles of my feet,—that it may take place soon. Otherwise, I know it is one of those subjects I shall never hear the last of."

When Mr. Gradgrind had presented Mrs. Bounderby, Sissy had suddenly turned her head, and looked, in wonder, in pity, in sorrow, in doubt, in a multitude of emotions, towards Louisa. Louisa had known it, and seen it, without looking at her. From that moment she was impassive, proud and cold—held Sissy at a distance—changed to her altogether.

CHAPTER XVI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Mr. Bounderby's first disquietude on hearing of his happiness, was occasioned by the necessity of imparting it to Mrs. Sparsit. He could not make up his mind how to do that, or what the consequences of the step might be. Whether she would instantly depart, bag and baggage, to Lady Scadgers, or would positively refuse to budge from the premises; whether she would be plaintive or abusive, tearful or tearing; whether she would break her heart, or break the looking-glass; Mr. Bounderby could not at all foresee. However, as it must be done, he had no choice but to do it; so, after attempting several letters, and failing in them all, he resolved to do it by word of mouth.

On his way home, on the evening he set aside for this momentous purpose, he took the precaution of stepping into a chemist's shop and buying a bottle of the very strongest smelling-salts. "By George!" said Mr. Bounderby, "if she takes it in the fainting way, I'll have the skin off her nose, at all events!" But, in spite of being thus forearmed, he entered his own house with anything but a courageous air; and appeared before the object of his misgivings, like a dog who was conscious of coming direct from the pantry.

"Good evening, Mr. Bounderby!"

"Good evening, ma'am, good evening." He drew up his chair, and Mrs. Sparsit drew back hers, as who should say,

"Your fireside, sir. I freely admit it. It is for you to occupy it all, if you think proper."

"Don't go to the North Pole, ma'am!" said Mr. Bounderby.

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, and returned, though short of her former position.

Mr. Bounderby sat looking at her, as, with the points of a stiff, sharp pair of scissors, she picked out holes for some inscrutable ornamental purpose, in a piece of cambric. An operation which, taken in connection with the bushy eyebrows and the Roman nose, suggested with some liveliness the idea of a hawk engaged upon the eyes of a tough little bird. She was so steadfastly occupied, that many minutes elapsed before she looked up from her work; when she did so Mr. Bounderby bespoke her attention with a hitch of his head.

"Mrs. Sparsit ma'am," said Mr. Bounderby, putting his hands in his pockets, and assuring himself with his right hand that the cork of the little bottle was ready for use, "I have no occasion to say to you, that you are not only a lady born and bred, but a devilish sensible woman."

"Sir," returned the lady, "this is indeed not the first time that you have honoured me with similar expressions of your good opinion."

"Mrs. Sparsit ma'am," said Mr. Bounderby, "I am going to astonish you."

"Yes, sir?" returned Mrs. Sparsit, interrogatively, and in the most tranquil manner possible. She generally wore mittens, and she now laid down her work, and smoothed those mittens.

"I am going, ma'am," said Bounderby, "to marry Tom Gradgrind's daughter."

"Yes, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit. "I hope you may be happy, Mr. Bounderby. Oh, indeed I hope you may be happy, sir!" And she said it with such great condescension as well as with such great compassion for him, that Bounderby,—far more disconcerted than if she had thrown her work-box at the mirror, or swooned on the hearth-rug,—corked up the smelling-salts tight in his pocket, and thought, "Now confound this woman, who could have ever guessed that she would take it in this way!"

"I wish with all my heart, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, in a highly superior manner; somehow she seemed in a moment,

to have established a right to pity him ever afterwards; "that you may be in all respects very happy."

"Well, ma'am," returned Bounderby, with some resentment in his tone: which was clearly lowered, though in spite of himself, "I am obliged to you. I hope I shall be."

"*Do* you, sir!" said Mrs. Sparsit, with great affability. "But naturally you do; of course you do."

A very awkward pause on Mr. Bounderby's part succeeded. Mrs. Sparsit sedately resumed her work and occasionally gave a small cough, which sounded like the cough of conscious strength and forbearance.

"Well, ma'am," resumed Bounderby, "under these circumstances, I imagine it would not be agreeable to a character like yours to remain here, though you would be very welcome here."

"Oh, dear no, sir, I could on no account think of that!" Mrs. Sparsit shook her head, still in her highly superior manner, and a little changed the small cough—coughing now, as if the spirit of prophecy rose within her, but had better be coughed down.

"However, ma'am," said Bounderby, "there are apartments at the Bank, where a born and bred lady, as keeper of the place, would be rather a catch than otherwise; and if the same terms—"

"I beg your pardon, sir. You were so good as to promise that you would always substitute the phrase, annual compliment."

"Well, ma'am, annual compliment. If the same annual compliment would be acceptable there, why, I see nothing to part us, unless you do."

"Sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit. "The proposal is like yourself, and if the position I shall assume at the Bank is one that I could occupy without descending lower in the social scale——"

"Why, of course it is," said Bounderby. "If it was not, ma'am, you don't suppose that I should offer it to a lady who has moved in the society you have moved in. Not that *I* care for such society, you know! But *you* do."

"Mr. Bounderby, you are very considerate."

"You'll have your own private apartments, and you'll have your coals and your candles, and all the rest of it, and you'll have your maid to attend upon you, and you'll have

your light porter to protect you, and you'll be what I take the liberty of considering precious comfortable," said Bounderby.

"Sir," rejoined Mrs. Sparsit, "say no more. In yielding up my trust here, I shall not be freed from the necessity of eating the bread of dependence:" she might have said the sweetbread, for that delicate article in a savoury brown sauce was her favourite supper: "and I would rather receive it from your hand, than from any other. Therefore, sir, I accept your offer gratefully, and with many sincere acknowledgments for past favours. And I hope, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, concluding in an impressively compassionate manner, "I fondly hope that Miss Gradgrind may be all you desire, and deserve!"

Nothing moved Mrs. Sparsit from that position any more. It was in vain for Bounderby to bluster or to assert himself in any of his explosive ways; Mrs. Sparsit was resolved to have compassion on him, as a Victim. She was polite, obliging, cheerful, hopeful; but, the more polite, the more obliging, the more cheerful, the more hopeful, the more exemplary altogether, she; the forlorner Sacrifice and Victim, he. She had that tenderness for his melancholy fate, that his great red countenance used to break out into cold perspirations when she looked at him.

Meanwhile the marriage was appointed to be solemnized in eight weeks' time, and Mr. Bounderby went every evening to Stone Lodge as an accepted wooer. Love was made on these occasions in the form of bracelets; and, on all occasions during the period of betrothal, took a manufacturing aspect. Dresses were made, jewellery was made, cakes and gloves were made, settlements were made, and an extensive assortment of Facts did appropriate honour to the contract. The business was all Fact, from first to last. The Hours did not go through any of those rosy performances, which foolish poets have ascribed to them at such times; neither did the clocks go any faster, or any slower, than at other seasons. The deadly statistical recorder in the Gradgrind observatory knocked every second on the head as it was born, and buried it with his accustomed regularity.

So the day came, as all other days come to people who will only stick to reason; and when it came, they were married in the church of the florid wooden legs—that popular

order of architecture—Josiah Bounderby Esquire of Coketown, to Louisa eldest daughter of Thomas Gradgrind Esquire of Stone Lodge, M.P. for that borough. And when they were united in holy matrimony, they went home to breakfast at Stone Lodge aforesaid.

There was an improving party assembled on the auspicious occasion, who knew what everything they had to eat and drink was made of, and how it was imported or exported, and in what quantities, and in what bottoms, whether native or foreign, and all about it. The bridesmaids, down to little Jane Gradgrind, were, in an intellectual point of view, fit helpmates for the calculating boy; and there was no nonsense about any of the company.

After breakfast, the bridegroom addressed them in the following terms:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. Since you have done my wife and myself the honour of drinking our healths and happiness, I suppose I must acknowledge the same; though, as you all know me, and know what I am, and what my extraction was, you won't expect a speech from a man who, when he sees a Post, says 'that's a Post,' and when he sees a Pump, says 'that's a Pump,' and is not to be got to call a Post a Pump, or a Pump a Post, or either of them a Toothpick. If you want a speech this morning, my friend and father-in-law, Tom Gradgrind, is a Member of Parliament, and you know where to get it. I am not your man. However, if I feel a little independent when I look around this table to-day, and reflect how little I thought of marrying Tom Gradgrind's daughter when I was a ragged street-boy, who never washed his face unless it was at a pump, and that not oftener than once a fortnight, I hope I may be excused. So, I hope you like my feeling independent; if you don't, I can't help it. I *do* feel independent. Now I have mentioned, and you have mentioned, that I am this day married to Tom Gradgrind's daughter. I am very glad to be so. It has long been my wish to be so. I have watched her bringing-up, and I believe she is worthy of me. At the same time—not to deceive you—I believe I am worthy of her. So, I thank you, on both our parts, for the goodwill you have shown towards us; and the best wish I can give the unmarried part of the present company, is this: I hope every bachelor may find as good a wife as I have

found. And I hope every spinster may find as good a husband as my wife has found."

Shortly after which oration, as they were going on a nuptial trip to Lyons, in order that Mr. Bounderby might take the opportunity of seeing how the Hands got on in those parts, and whether they, too, required to be fed with gold spoons; the happy pair departed for the railroad. The Bride, in passing downstairs, dressed for her journey, found Tom waiting for her—flushed, either with his feelings or the vinous part of the breakfast.

"What a game girl you are, to be such a first-rate sister, Loo!" whispered Tom.

She clung to him as she should have clung to some far better nature that day, and was a little shaken in her reserved composure for the first time.

"Old Bounderby's quite ready," said Tom. "Time's up. Good bye! I shall be on the look-out for you, when you come back. I say, my dear Loo! AN'T it uncommonly jolly now!"

BOOK THE SECOND.—REAPING.

CHAPTER I.

EFFECTS IN THE BANK.

A SUNNY midsummer day. There was such a thing sometimes, even in Coketown.

Seen from a distance in such weather, Coketown lay shrouded in a haze of its own, which appeared impervious to the sun's rays. You only knew the town was there, because you knew there could have been no such sulky blotch upon the prospect without a town. A blur of soot and smoke, now confusedly tending this way, now that way, now aspiring to the vault of Heaven, now murkily creeping along the earth, as the wind rose and fell, or changed its quarter: a dense formless jumble, with sheets of cross light in it, that showed nothing but masses of darkness:—Coketown in the distance was suggestive of itself, though not a brick of it could be seen.

The wonder was, it was there at all. It had been ruined so often, that it was amazing how it had borne so many shocks. Surely there never was such fragile china-ware as that of which the millers of Coketown were made. Handle them never so lightly, and they fell to pieces with such ease that you might suspect them of having been flawed before. They were ruined, when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined, when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined, when such inspectors considered it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up with their machinery; they were utterly undone, when it was hinted that perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke. Besides Mr. Bounderby's gold spoon which was generally received in Coketown, another preva-

lent fiction was very popular there. It took the form of a threat. Whenever a Coketowner felt he was ill-used—that is to say, whenever he was not left entirely alone, and it was proposed to hold him accountable for the consequences of any of his acts—he was sure to come out with the awful menace, that he would "sooner pitch his property into the Atlantic." This had terrified the Home Secretary within an inch of his life, on several occasions.

However, the Coketowners were so patriotic after all, that they never had pitched their property into the Atlantic yet, but, on the contrary, had been kind enough to take mighty good care of it. So there it was, in the haze yonder; and it increased and multiplied.

The streets were hot and dusty on the summer day, and the sun was so bright that it even shone through the heavy vapour drooping over Coketown, and could not be looked at steadily. Stokers emerged from low underground doorways into factory yards, and sat on steps, and posts, and palings, wiping their swarthy visages, and contemplating coals. The whole town seemed to be frying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. The steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the Hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories oozed and trickled it. The atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoom: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert. But no temperature made the melancholy mad elephants more mad or more sane. Their wearisome heads went up and down at the same rate, in hot weather and cold, wet weather and dry, fair weather and foul. The measured motion of their shadows on the walls, was the substitute Coketown had to show for the shadows of rustling woods; while, for the summer hum of insects, it could offer, all the year round, from the dawn of Monday to the night of Saturday, the whirr of shafts and wheels.

Drowsily they whirred all through this sunny day, making the passenger more sleepy and more hot as he passed the humming walls of the mills. Sun-blinds, and sprinklings of water, a little cooled the main streets and the shops; but the mills, and the courts and alleys, baked at a fierce heat. Down upon the river that was black and thick with dye, some Coketown boys who were at large—a rare sight there—rowed a crazy boat, which made a spumous

track upon the water as it jogged along, while every dip of an oar stirred up vile smells. But the sun itself, however beneficent, generally, was less kind to Coketown than hard frost, and rarely looked intently into any of its closer regions without engendering more death than life. So does the eye of Heaven itself become an evil eye, when incapable or sordid hands are interposed between it and the things it looks upon to bless.

Mrs. Sparsit sat in her afternoon apartment at the Bank, on the shadier side of the frying street. Office-hours were over: and at that period of the day, in warm weather, she usually embellished with her genteel presence, a managerial board-room over the public office. Her own private sitting-room was a story higher, at the window of which post of observation she was ready, every morning, to greet Mr. Bounderby, as he came across the road, with the sympathising recognition appropriate to a Victim. He had been married now a year; and Mrs. Sparsit had never released him from her determined pity a moment.

The Bank offered no violence to the wholesome monotony of the town. It was another red brick house, with black outside shutters, green inside blinds, a black street-door up two white steps, a brazen door-plate, and a brazen door-handle full stop. It was a size larger than Mr. Bounderby's house, as other houses were from a size to half a dozen sizes smaller; in all other particulars, it was strictly according to pattern.

Mrs. Sparsit was conscious that by coming in the evening-tide among the desks and writing implements, she shed a feminine, not to say also aristocratic, grace upon the office. Seated, with her needlework or netting apparatus, at the window, she had a self-laudatory sense of correcting, by her ladylike deportment, the rude business aspect of the place. With this impression of her interesting character upon her, Mrs. Sparsit considered herself, in some sort, the Bank Fairy. The townspeople who, in their passing and repassing, saw her there, regarded her as the Bank Dragon keeping watch over the treasures of the mine.

What those treasures were, Mrs. Sparsit knew as little as they did. Gold and silver coin, precious paper, secrets that if divulged would bring vague destruction upon vague persons (generally, however, people whom she disliked), were the chief items in her ideal catalogue thereof. For

the rest, she knew that after office-hours, she reigned supreme over all the office furniture, and over a locked-up iron room with three locks, against the door of which strong chamber the light porter laid his head every night, on a truckle bed, that disappeared at cockcrow. Further, she was lady paramount over certain vaults in the basement, sharply spiked off from communication with the predatory world; and over the relics of the current day's work, consisting of blots of ink, worn-out pens, fragments of wafers, and scraps of paper torn so small, that nothing interesting could ever be deciphered on them when Mrs. Sparsit tried. Lastly, she was guardian over a little armoury of cutlasses and carbines, arrayed in vengeful order above one of the official chimney-pieces; and over that respectable tradition never to be separated from a place of business claiming to be wealthy—a row of fire-buckets—vessels calculated to be of no physical utility on any occasion, but observed to exercise a fine moral influence, almost equal to bullion, on most beholders.

A deaf serving-woman and a light porter completed Mrs. Sparsit's empire. The deaf serving-woman was rumoured to be wealthy; and a saying had for years gone about among the lower orders of Coketown, that she would be murdered some night when the Bank was shut, for the sake of her money. It was generally considered, indeed, that she had been due some time, and ought to have fallen long ago; but she had kept her life, and her situation, with an ill-conditioned tenacity that occasioned much offence and disappointment.

Mrs. Sparsit's tea was just set for her on a pert little table, with its tripod of legs in an attitude, which she insinuated after office-hours, into the company of the stern, leathern-topped, long board-table that bestrode the middle of the room. The light porter placed the tea-tray on it, knuckling his forehead as a form of homage.

"Thank you, Bitzer," said Mrs. Sparsit.

"Thank *you*, ma'am," returned the light porter. He was a very light porter indeed; as light as in the days when he blinkingly defined a horse, for girl number twenty.

"All is shut up, Bitzer?" said Mrs. Sparsit.

"All is shut up, ma'am."

"And what," said Mrs. Sparsit, pouring out her tea, "is the news of the day? Anything?"

"Louisa, my dear, you are the subject of a proposal of marriage that has been made to me." —*Hard Times*, ch. xv., p. 87.

"Well, ma'am, I can't say that I have heard anything particular. Our people are a bad lot, ma'am; but that is no news, unfortunately."

"What are the restless wretches doing now?" asked Mrs. Sparsit.

"Merely going on in the old way, ma'am. Uniting, and leaguing, and engaging to stand by one another."

"It is much to be regretted," said Mrs. Sparsit, making her nose more Roman and her eyebrows more Coriolanian in the strength of her severity, "that the united masters allow of any such class-combinations."

"Yes, ma'am," said Bitzer.

"Being united themselves, they ought one and all to set their faces against employing any man who is united with any other man," said Mrs. Sparsit.

"They have done that, ma'am," returned Bitzer; "but it rather fell through, ma'am."

"I do not pretend to understand these things," said Mrs. Sparsit, with dignity, "my lot having been signally cast in a widely different sphere; and Mr. Sparsit, as a Powler, being also quite out of the pale of any such dissensions. I only know that these people must be conquered, and that it's high time it was done, once for all."

"Yes, ma'am," returned Bitzer, with a demonstration of great respect for Mrs. Sparsit's oracular authority. "You couldn't put it clearer, I am sure, ma'am."

As this was his usual hour for having a little confidential chat with Mrs. Sparsit, and as he had already caught her eye and seen that she was going to ask him something, he made a pretence of arranging the rulers, inkstands, and so forth, while that lady went on with her tea, glancing through the open window, down into the street.

"Has it been a busy day, Bitzer?" asked Mrs. Sparsit.

"Not a very busy day, my lady. About an average day." He now and then slided into my lady, instead of ma'am, as an involuntary acknowledgment of Mrs. Sparsit's personal dignity and claims to reverence.

"The clerks," said Mrs. Sparsit, carefully brushing an imperceptible crumb of bread and butter from her left-hand mitten, "are trustworthy, punctual, and industrious, of course?"

"Yes, ma'am, pretty fair, ma'am. With the usual exception."

He held the respectable office of general spy and informer in the establishment, for which volunteer service he received a present at Christmas, over and above his weekly wage. He had grown into an extremely clear-headed, cautious, prudent young man, who was safe to rise in the world. His mind was so exactly regulated, that he had no affections or passions. All his proceedings were the result of the nicest and coldest calculation; and it was not without cause that Mrs. Sparsit habitually observed of him, that he was a young man of the steadiest principle she had ever known. Having satisfied himself, on his father's death, that his mother had a right of settlement in Coketown, this young economist had asserted that right for her with such a steadfast adherence to the principle of the case, that she had been shut up in the workhouse ever since. It must be admitted that he allowed her half a pound of tea a year, which was weak in him: first, because all gifts have an inevitable tendency to pauperise the recipient, and secondly, because his only reasonable transaction in that commodity would have been to buy it for as little as he could possibly give, and sell it for as much as he could possibly get; it having been clearly ascertained by philosophers that in this is comprised the whole duty of man—not a part of man's duty, but the whole.

"Pretty fair, ma'am. With the usual exception, ma'am," repeated Bitzer.

"Ah—h!" said Mrs. Sparsit, shaking her head over her tea-cup, and taking a long gulp.

"Mr. Thomas, ma'am, I doubt Mr. Thomas very much, ma'am, I don't like his ways at all."

"Bitzer," said Mrs. Sparsit, in a very impressive manner, "do you recollect my having said anything to you respecting names?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. It's quite true that you did object to names being used, and they're always best avoided."

"Please to remember that I have a charge here," said Mrs. Sparsit, with her air of state. "I hold a trust here, Bitzer, under Mr. Bounderby. However improbable both Mr. Bounderby and myself might have deemed it years ago, that he would ever become my patron, making me an annual compliment, I cannot but regard him in that light. From Mr. Bounderby I have received every acknowledgment of my social station, and every recognition of my

family descent, that I could possibly expect. More, far more. Therefore, to my patron I would be scrupulously true. And I do not consider, I will not consider, I cannot consider," said Mrs. Sparsit, with a most extensive stock on hand of honour and morality, "that I *should* be scrupulously true, if I allowed names to be mentioned under this roof, that are unfortunately—most unfortunately—no doubt of that—connected with his."

Bitzer knuckled his forehead again, and again begged pardon.

"No, Bitzer," continued Mrs. Sparsit, "say an individual, and I will hear you; say Mr. Thomas, and you must excuse me."

"With the usual exception, ma'am," said Bitzer, trying back, "of an individual."

"Ah—h!" Mrs. Sparsit repeated the ejaculation, the shake of the head over her tea-cup, and the long gulp, as taking up the conversation again at the point where it had been interrupted.

"An individual, ma'am," said Bitzer, "has never been what he ought to have been, since he first came into the place. He is a dissipated, extravagant idler. He is not worth his salt, ma'am. He wouldn't get it either, if he hadn't a friend and relation at court, ma'am!"

"Ah—h!" said Mrs. Sparsit, with another melancholy shake of her head.

"I only hope, ma'am," pursued Bitzer, "that his friend and relation may not supply him with the means of carrying on. Otherwise, ma'am, we know out of whose pocket *that* money comes."

"Ah—h!" sighed Mrs. Sparsit again, with another melancholy shake of her head.

"He is to be pitied, ma'am. The last party I have alluded to, is to be pitied, ma'am," said Bitzer.

"Yes, Bitzer," said Mrs. Sparsit. "I have always pitied the delusion, always."

"As to an individual, ma'am," said Bitzer, dropping his voice and drawing nearer, "he is as improvident as any of the people in this town. And you know what *their* improvidence is, ma'am. No one could wish to know it better than a lady of your eminence does."

"They would do well," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "to take example by you, Bitzer."

"Thank you, ma'am. But, since you do refer to me, now look at me, ma'am. I have put by a little, ma'am, already. That gratuity which I receive at Christmas, ma'am: I never touch it. I don't even go the length of my wages, though they're not high, ma'am. Why can't they do as I have done, ma'am? What one person can do, another can do."

This, again, was among the fictions of Coketown. Any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn't each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat. What I did you can do. Why don't you go and do it?

"As to their wanting recreations, ma'am," said Bitzer, "it's stuff and nonsense. *I* don't want recreations. I never did, and I never shall: I don't like 'em. As to their combining together; there are many of them, I have no doubt, that by watching and informing upon one another could earn a trifle now and then, whether in money or good will, and improve their livelihood. Then, why don't they improve it, ma'am! It's the first consideration of a rational creature, and it's what they pretend to want."

"Pretend indeed!" said Mrs. Sparsit.

"I am sure we are constantly hearing, ma'am, till it becomes quite nauseous, concerning their wives and families," said Bitzer. "Why look at me, ma'am! *I* don't want a wife and family. Why should they?"

"Because they are improvident," said Mrs. Sparsit.

"Yes, ma'am," returned Bitzer, "that's where it is. If they were more provident and less perverse, ma'am, what would they do? They would say, 'While my hat covers my family,' or 'while my bonnet covers my family,'—as the case might be, ma'am—'I have only one to feed, and that's the person I most like to feed.'"

"To be sure," assented Mrs. Sparsit, eating muffin.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Bitzer, knuckling his forehead again, in return for the favour of Mrs. Sparsit's improving conversation. "Would you wish a little more hot water, ma'am, or is there anything else I could fetch you?"

"Nothing just now, Bitzer."

"Thank you, ma'am. I shouldn't wish to disturb you

at your meals, ma'am, particularly tea, knowing your partiality for it," said Bitzer, craning a little to look over into the street from where he stood; "but there's a gentleman been looking up here for a minute or so, ma'am, and he has come across as if he was going to knock. That *is* his knock, ma'am, no doubt."

He stepped to the window; and looking out, and drawing in his head again, confirmed himself with, "Yes, ma'am. Would you wish the gentleman to be shown in, ma'am?"

"I don't know who it can be," said Mrs. Sparsit, wiping her mouth and arranging her mittens.

"A stranger, ma'am, evidently."

"What a stranger can want at the Bank at this time of the evening, unless he comes upon some business for which he is too late, I don't know," said Mrs. Sparsit, "but I hold a charge in this establishment from Mr. Bounderby, and I will never shrink from it. If to see him is any part of the duty I have accepted, I will see him. Use your own discretion, Bitzer."

Here the visitor, all unconscious of Mrs. Sparsit's magnanimous words, repeated his knock so loudly that the light porter hastened down to open the door; while Mrs. Sparsit took the precaution of concealing her little table, with all its appliances upon it, in a cupboard, and then decamped upstairs, that she might appear, if needful, with the greater dignity.

"If you please, ma'am, the gentleman would wish to see you," said Bitzer, with his light eye at Mrs. Sparsit's keyhole. So, Mrs. Sparsit, who had improved the interval by touching up her cap, took her classical features downstairs again, and entered the board-room in the manner of a Roman matron going outside the city walls to treat with an invading general.

The visitor having strolled to the window, and being then engaged in looking carelessly out, was as unmoved by this impressive entry as man could possibly be. He stood whistling to himself with all imaginable coolness, with his hat still on, and a certain air of exhaustion upon him, in part arising from excessive summer, and in part from excessive gentility. For it was to be seen with half an eye that he was a thorough gentleman, made to the model of the time; weary of everything, and putting no more faith in anything than Lucifer.

"I believe, sir," quoth Mrs. Sparsit, "you wished to see me."

"I beg your pardon," he said, turning and removing his hat; "pray excuse me."

"Humph!" thought Mrs. Sparsit, as she made a stately bend. "Five-and-thirty, good-looking, good figure, good teeth, good voice, good breeding, well-dressed, dark hair, bold eyes." All which Mrs. Sparsit observed in her womanly way—like the Sultan who put his head in the pail of water—merely in dipping down and coming up again.

"Please to be seated, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit.

"Thank you. Allow me." He placed a chair for her, but remained himself carelessly lounging against the table. "I left my servant at the railway looking after the luggage —very heavy train and vast quantity of it in the van—and strolled on, looking about me. Exceedingly odd place. Will you allow me to ask you if it's *always* as black as this?"

"In general much blacker," returned Mrs. Sparsit, in her uncompromising way.

"Is it possible! Excuse me: you are not a native, I think?"

"No, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit. "It was once my good or ill fortune, as it may be—before I became a widow —to move in a very different sphere. My husband was a Powler."

"Beg your pardon, really!" said the stranger. "Was—?"

Mrs. Sparsit repeated, "A Powler."

"Powler Family," said the stranger, after reflecting a few moments. Mrs. Sparsit signified assent. The stranger seemed a little more fatigued than before.

"You must be very much bored here?" was the inference he drew from the communication.

"I am the servant of circumstances, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, "and I have long adapted myself to the governing power of my life."

"Very philosophical," returned the stranger, "and very exemplary and laudable, and—" It seemed to be scarcely worth his while to finish the sentence, so he played with his watch-chain wearily.

"May I be permitted to ask, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, "to what I am indebted for the favour of—"

"Assuredly," said the stranger. "Much obliged to you

for reminding me. I am the bearer of a letter of introduction to Mr. Bounderby the banker. Walking through this extraordinary black town, while they were getting dinner ready at the hotel, I asked a fellow whom I met; one of the working people; who appeared to have been taking a shower-bath of something fluffy, which I assume to be the raw material—"

Mrs. Sparsit inclined her head.

"—Raw material—where Mr. Bounderby, the banker, might reside. Upon which, misled no doubt by the word Banker, he directed me to the Bank.—Fact being, I presume, that Mr. Bounderby the Banker, does *not* reside in the edifice in which I have the honour of offering this explanation?"

"No, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "he does not."

"Thank you. I had no intention of delivering my letter at the present moment, nor have I. But strolling on to the Bank to kill time, and having the good fortune to observe at the window," towards which he languidly waved his hand, then slightly bowed, "a lady of a very superior and agreeable appearance, I considered that I could not do better than take the liberty of asking that lady where Mr. Bounderby the Banker *does* live. Which I accordingly venture, with all suitable apologies, to do."

The inattention and indolence of his manner were sufficiently relieved, to Mrs. Sparsit's thinking, by a certain gallantry at ease, which offered her homage too. Here he was, for instance, at this moment, all but sitting on the table, and yet lazily bending over her, as if he acknowledged an attraction in her that made her charming—in her way.

"Banks, I know, are always suspicious, and officially must be," said the stranger, whose lightness and smoothness of speech were pleasant likewise; suggesting matter far more sensible and humorous than it ever contained—which was perhaps a shrewd device of the founder of this numerous sect, whosoever may have been that great man: "therefore I may observe that my letter—here it is—is from the member for this place—Gradgrind—whom I have had the pleasure of knowing in London."

Mrs. Sparsit recognised the hand, intimated that such confirmation was quite unnecessary, and gave Mr. Bounderby's address, with all needful clues and directions in aid

"Thousand thanks," said the stranger. "Of course you know the Banker well?"

"Yes, sir," rejoined Mrs. Sparsit. "In my dependent relation towards him, I have known him ten years."

"Quite an eternity! I think he married Gradgrind's daughter?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Sparsit, suddenly compressing her mouth, "he had that—honour."

"The lady is quite a philosopher, I am told?"

"Indeed, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit. "*Is* she?"

"Excuse my impertinent curiosity," pursued the stranger, fluttering over Mrs. Sparsit's eyebrows, with a propitiatory air, "but you know the family, and know the world. I am about to know the family, and may have much to do with them. Is the lady so very alarming? Her father gives her such a portentously hard-headed reputation, that I have a burning desire to know. Is she absolutely unapproachable? Repellently and stunningly clever? I see, by your meaning smile, you think not. You have poured balm into my anxious soul. As to age, now. Forty! Five-and-thirty?"

Mrs. Sparsit laughed outright. "A chit," said she. "Not twenty when she was married."

"I give you my honour, Mrs. Powler," returned the stranger, detaching himself from the table, "that I never was so astonished in my life!"

It really did seem to impress him, to the utmost extent of his capacity of being impressed. He looked at his informant for full a quarter of a minute, and appeared to have the surprise in his mind all the time. "I assure you, Mrs. Powler," he then said, much exhausted, "that the father's manner prepared me for a grim and stony maturity. I am obliged to you, of all things, for correcting so absurd a mistake. Pray excuse my intrusion. Many thanks. Good day!"

He bowed himself out; and Mrs. Sparsit, hiding in the window curtain, saw him languishing down the street on the shady side of the way, observed of all the town.

"What do you think of the gentleman, Bitzer?" she asked the light porter, when he came to take away.

"Spends a deal of money on his dress, ma'am."

"It must be admitted," said Mrs. Sparsit, "that it's very tasteful."

"Yes, ma'am," returned Bitzer, "if that's worth the money."

"Besides which, ma'am," resumed Bitzer, while he was polishing the table, "he looks to me as if he gamed."

"It's immoral to game," said Mrs. Sparsit.

"It's ridiculous, ma'am," said Bitzer, "because the chances are against the players."

Whether it was that the heat prevented Mrs. Sparsit from working, or whether it was that her hand was out, she did no work that night. She sat at the window, when the sun began to sink behind the smoke; she sat there, when the smoke was burning red, when the colour faded from it, when darkness seemed to rise slowly out of the ground, and creep upward, upward, up to the house-tops, up the church steeple, up to the summits of the factory chimneys, up to the sky. Without a candle in the room, Mrs. Sparsit sat at the window, with her hands before her, not thinking much of the sounds of evening; the whooping of boys, the barking of dogs, the rumbling of wheels, the steps and voices of passengers, the shrill street cries, the clogs upon the pavement when it was their hour for going by, the shutting-up of shop-shutters. Not until the light porter announced that her nocturnal sweetbread was ready, did Mrs. Sparsit arouse herself from her reverie, and convey her dense black eyebrows—by that time creased with meditation, as if they needed ironing out—upstairs.

"O, you Fool!" said Mrs. Sparsit, when she was alone at her supper. Whom she meant, she did not say; but she could scarcely have meant the sweetbread.

CHAPTER II.

MR. JAMES HARTHOUSE.

The Gradgrind party wanted assistance in cutting the throats of the Graces. They went about recruiting; and where could they enlist recruits more hopefully, than among the fine gentlemen who, having found out everything to be worth nothing, were equally ready for anything?

Moreover, the healthy spirits who had mounted to this sublime height were attractive to many of the Gradgrind

school. They liked fine gentlemen; they pretended that they did not, but they did. They became exhausted in imitation of them; and they yaw-yawed in their speech like them; and they served out, with an enervated air, the little mouldy rations of political economy, on which they regaled their disciples. There never before was seen on earth such a wonderful hybrid race as was thus produced.

Among the fine gentlemen not regularly belonging to the Gradgrind school, there was one of a good family and a better appearance, with a happy turn of humour which had told immensely with the House of Commons on the occasion of his entertaining it with his (and the Board of Directors') view of a railway accident, in which the most careful officers ever known, employed by the most liberal managers ever heard of, assisted by the finest mechanical contrivances ever devised, the whole in action on the best line ever constructed, had killed five people and wounded thirty-two, by a casualty without which the excellence of the whole system would have been positively incomplete. Among the slain was a cow, and among the scattered articles unowned, a widow's cap. And the honourable member had so tickled the House (which has a delicate sense of humour) by putting the cap on the cow, that it became impatient of any serious reference to the Coroner's Inquest, and brought the railway off with Cheers and Laughter.

Now, this gentleman had a younger brother of still better appearance than himself, who had tried life as a Cornet of Dragoons, and found it a bore; and had afterwards tried it in the train of an English minister abroad, and found it a bore; and had then strolled to Jerusalem, and got bored there; and had then gone yachting about the world, and got bored everywhere. To whom this honourable and jocular member fraternally said one day, "Jem, there's a good opening among the hard Fact fellows, and they want men. I wonder you don't go in for statistics." Jem, rather taken by the novelty of the idea, and very hard up for a change, was as ready to "go in" for statistics as for anything else. So, he went in. He coached himself up with a blue book or two; and his brother put it about among the hard Fact fellows, and said, "If you want to bring in, for any place, a handsome dog who can make you a devilish good speech, look after my brother Jem, for he s your man." After a few dashes in the public meeting way, Mr.

Gradgrind and a council of political sages approved of Jem, and it was resolved to send him down to Coketown, to become known there and in the neighbourhood. Hence the letter Jem had last night shown to Mrs. Sparsit, which Mr. Bounderby now held in his hand; superscribed, "Josiah Bounderby, Esquire, Banker, Coketown. Specially to introduce James Harthouse, Esquire. Thomas Gradgrind."

Within an hour of the receipt of this despatch and Mr. James Harthouse's card, Mr. Bounderby put on his hat and went down to the Hotel. There he found Mr. James Harthouse looking out of window, in a state of mind so disconsolate, that he was already half disposed to "go in" for something else.

"My name, sir," said his visitor, "is Josiah Bounderby, of Coketown."

Mr. James Harthouse was very happy indeed (though he scarcely looked so), to have a pleasure he had long expected.

"Coketown, sir," said Bounderby, obstinately taking a chair, "is not the kind of place you have been accustomed to. Therefore, if you will allow me—or whether you will or not, for I am a plain man—I'll tell you something about it before we go any further."

Mr. Harthouse would be charmed.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Bounderby. "I don't promise it. First of all, you see our smoke. That's meat and drink to us. It's the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs. If you are one of those who want us to consume it, I differ from you. We are not going to wear the bottoms of our boilers out any faster than we wear 'em out now, for all the humbugging sentiment in Great Britain and Ireland."

By way of "going in" to the fullest extent, Mr. Harthouse rejoined, "Mr. Bounderby, I assure you I am entirely and completely of your way of thinking. On conviction."

"I am glad to hear it," said Bounderby. "Now, you have heard a lot of talk about the work in our mills, no doubt. You have? Very good. I'll state the fact of it to you. It's the pleasantest work there is, and it's the lightest work there is, and it's the best paid work there is. More than that, we couldn't improve the mills themselves, unless we laid down Turkey carpets on the floors. Which we're not a going to do."

"Mr. Bounderby, perfectly right."

"Lastly," said Bounderby, "as to our Hands. There's not a Hand in this town, sir, man, woman, or child, but has one ultimate object in life. That object is, to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon. Now, they're not a going—none of 'em—ever to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon. And now you know the place."

Mr. Harthouse professed himself in the highest degree instructed and refreshed, by this condensed epitome of the whole Coketown question.

"Why, you see," replied Mr. Bounderby, "it suits my disposition to have a full understanding with a man, particularly with a public man, when I make his acquaintance. I have only one thing more to say to you, Mr. Harthouse, before assuring you of the pleasure with which I shall respond, to the utmost of my poor ability, to my friend Tom Gradgrind's letter of introduction. You are a man of family. Don't you deceive yourself by supposing for a moment that I am a man of family. I am a bit of dirty riff-raff, and a genuine scrap of tag, rag, and bobtail."

If anything could have exalted Jem's interest in Mr. Bounderby, it would have been this very circumstance. Or, so he told him.

"So now," said Bounderby, "we may shake hands on equal terms. I say, equal terms, because although I know what I am, and the exact depth of the gutter I have lifted myself out of, better than any man does, I am as proud as you are. I am just as proud as you are. Having now asserted my independence in a proper manner, I may come to how do you find yourself, and I hope you're pretty well."

The better, Mr. Harthouse gave him to understand as they shook hands, for the salubrious air of Coketown. Mr. Bounderby received the answer with favour.

"Perhaps you know," said he, "or perhaps you don't know, I married Tom Gradgrind's daughter. If you have nothing better to do than to walk up-town with me, I shall be glad to introduce you to Tom Gradgrind's daughter."

"Mr. Bounderby," said Jem, "you anticipate my dearest wishes."

They went out without further discourse; and Mr. Bounderby piloted the new acquaintance who so strongly contrasted with him, to the private red brick dwelling, with

the black outside shutters, the green inside blinds, and the black street door up the two white steps. In the drawing-room of which mansion, there presently entered to them the most remarkable girl Mr. James Harthouse had ever seen. She was so constrained, and yet so careless; so reserved, and yet so watchful; so cold and proud, and yet so sensitively ashamed of her husband's braggart humility —from which she shrunk as if every example of it were a cut or a blow; that it was quite a new sensation to observe her. In face she was no less remarkable than in manner. Her features were handsome, but their natural play was so locked up, that it seemed impossible to guess at their genuine expression. Utterly indifferent, perfectly self-reliant, never at a loss, and yet never at her ease, with her figure in company with them there, and her mind apparently quite alone—it was of no use "going in" yet awhile to comprehend this girl, for she baffled all penetration.

From the mistress of the house, the visitor glanced to the house itself. There was no mute sign of a woman in the room. No graceful little adornment, no fanciful little device, however trivial, anywhere expressed her influence. Cheerless and comfortless, boastfully and doggedly rich, there the room stared at its present occupants, unsoftened and unrelieved by the least trace of any womanly occupation. As Mr. Bounderby stood in the midst of his household gods, so those unrelenting divinities occupied their places around Mr. Bounderby, and they were worthy of one another, and well matched.

"This, sir," said Bounderby, "is my wife, Mrs. Bounderby: Tom Gradgrind's eldest daughter. Loo, Mr. James Harthouse. Mr. Harthouse has joined your father's muster-roll. If he is not Tom Gradgrind's colleague before long, I believe we shall at least hear of him in connection with one of our neighbouring towns. You observe, Mr. Harthouse, that my wife is my junior. I don't know what she saw in me to marry me, but she saw something in me, I suppose, or she wouldn't have married me. She has lots of expensive knowledge, sir, political and otherwise. If you want to cram for anything, I should be troubled to recommend you to a better adviser than Loo Bounderby."

To a more agreeable adviser, or one from whom he would be more likely to learn, Mr. Harthouse could never be recommended.

"Come!" said his host. "If you're in the complimentary line, you'll get on here, for you'll meet with no competition. I have never been in the way of learning compliments myself, and I don't profess to understand the art of paying 'em. In fact, despise 'em. But, your bringing-up was different from mine; mine was a real thing, by George! You're a gentleman, and I don't pretend to be one. I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, and that's enough for me. However, though I am not influenced by manners and station, Loo Bounderby may be. She hadn't my advantages —disadvantages you would call 'em, but I call 'em advantages—so you'll not waste your power, I dare say."

"Mr. Bounderby," said Jem, turning with a smile to Louisa, "is a noble animal in a comparatively natural state, quite free from the harness in which a conventional hack like myself works."

"You respect Mr. Bounderby very much," she quietly returned. "It is natural that you should."

He was disgracefully thrown out, for a gentleman who had seen so much of the world, and thought, "Now, how am I to take this?"

"You are going to devote yourself, as I gather from what Mr. Bounderby has said, to the service of your country. You have made up your mind," said Louisa, still standing before him where she had first stopped—in all the singular contrariety of her self-possession, and her being obviously very ill at ease—"to show the nation the way out of all its difficulties."

"Mrs. Bounderby," he returned, laughing, "upon my honour, no. I will make no such pretence to you. I have seen a little, here and there, up and down; I have found it all to be very worthless, as everybody has, and as some confess they have, and some do not; and I am going in for your respected father's opinions—really because I have no choice of opinions, and may as well back them as anything else."

"Have you none of your own?" asked Louisa.

"I have not so much as the slightest predilection left. I assure you I attach not the least importance to any opinions. The result of the varieties of boredom I have undergone is a conviction (unless conviction is too industrious a word for the lazy sentiment I entertain on the subject), that any set of ideas will do just as much good as any other

set, and just as much harm as any other set. There's an English family with a charming Italian motto. What will be, will be. It's the only truth going!"

This vicious assumption of honesty in dishonesty—a vice so dangerous, so deadly, and so common—seemed, he observed, a little to impress her in his favour. He followed up the advantage, by saying in his pleasantest manner: a manner to which she might attach as much or as little meaning as she pleased: "The side that can prove anything in a line of units, tens, hundreds, and thousands, Mrs. Bounderby, seems to me to afford the most fun, and to give a man the best chance. I am quite as much attached to it as if I believed it. I am quite ready to go in for it, to the same extent as if I believed it. And what more could I possibly do, if I did believe it!"

"You are a singular politician," said Louisa.

"Pardon me; I have not even that merit. We are the largest party in the state, I assure you, Mrs. Bounderby, if we fell out of our adopted ranks and were reviewed together."

Mr. Bounderby, who had been in danger of bursting in silence, interposed here with a project for postponing the family dinner till half-past six, and taking Mr. James Harthouse in the meantime on a round of visits to the voting and interesting notabilities of Coketown and its vicinity. The round of visits was made; and Mr. James Harthouse, with a discreet use of his blue coaching, came off triumphantly, though with a considerable accession of boredom.

In the evening, he found the dinner-table laid for four, but they sat down only three. It was an appropriate occasion for Mr. Bounderby to discuss the flavour of the hap'orth of stewed eels he had purchased in the streets at eight years old; and also of the inferior water, specially used for laying the dust, with which he had washed down that repast. He likewise entertained his guest over the soup and fish, with the calculation that he (Bounderby) had eaten in his youth at least three horses under the guise of polonies and saveloys. These recitals, Jem, in a languid manner, received with "charming!" every now and then; and they probably would have decided him to "go in" for Jerusalem again to-morrow morning, had he been less curious respecting Louisa.

"Is there nothing," he thought, glancing at her as she

sat at the head of the table, where her youthful figure, small and slight, but very graceful, looked as pretty as it looked misplaced; "is there nothing that will move that face?"

Yes! By Jupiter, there was something, and here it was, in an unexpected shape. Tom appeared. She changed as the door opened, and broke into a beaming smile.

A beautiful smile. Mr. James Harthouse might not have thought so much of it, but that he had wondered so long at her impassive face. She put out her hand—a pretty little soft hand; and her fingers closed upon her brother's, as if she would have carried them to her lips.

"Ay, ay?" thought the visitor. "This whelp is the only creature she cares for. So, so!"

The whelp was presented, and took his chair. The appellation was not flattering, but not unmerited.

"When I was your age, young Tom," said Bounderby, "I was punctual, or I got no dinner!"

"When you were my age," returned Tom, "you hadn't a wrong balance to get right, and hadn't to dress afterwards."

"Never mind that now," said Bounderby.

"Well, then," grumbled Tom. "Don't begin with me."

"Mrs. Bounderby," said Harthouse, perfectly hearing this understrain as it went on; "your brother's face is quite familiar to me. Can I have seen him abroad? Or at some public school, perhaps?"

"No," she returned, quite interested, "he has never been abroad yet, and was educated here, at home. Tom, love, I am telling Mr. Harthouse that he never saw you abroad."

"No such luck, sir," said Tom.

There was little enough in him to brighten her face, for he was a sullen young fellow, and ungracious in his manner even to her. So much the greater must have been the solitude of her heart, and her need of some one on whom to bestow it. "So much the more is this whelp the only creature she has ever cared for," thought Mr. James Harthouse, turning it over and over. "So much the more. So much the more."

Both in his sister's presence, and after she had left the room, the whelp took no pains to hide his contempt for Mr. Bounderby, whenever he could indulge it without the observation of that independent man, by making wry faces, or

shutting one eye. Without responding to these telegraphic communications, Mr. Harthouse encouraged him much in the course of the evening, and showed an unusual liking for him. At last, when he rose to return to his hotel, and was a little doubtful whether he knew the way by night, the whelp immediately proffered his services as guide, and turned out with him to escort him thither.

CHAPTER III.

THE WHELP.

It was very remarkable that a young gentleman who had been brought up under one continuous system of unnatural restraint, should be a hypocrite; but it was certainly the case with Tom. It was very strange that a young gentleman who had never been left to his own guidance for five consecutive minutes, should be incapable at last of governing himself; but so it was with Tom. It was altogether unaccountable that a young gentleman whose imagination had been strangled in his cradle, should be still inconvenienced by its ghost in the form of grovelling sensualities; but such a monster, beyond all doubt, was Tom.

"Do you smoke?" asked Mr. James Harthouse, when they came to the hotel.

"I believe you!" said Tom.

He could do no less than ask Tom up; and Tom could do no less than go up. What with a cooling drink adapted to the weather, but not so weak as cool; and what with a rarer tobacco than was to be bought in those parts; Tom was soon in a highly free and easy state at his end of the sofa, and more than ever disposed to admire his new friend at the other end.

Tom blew his smoke aside, after he had been smoking a little while, and took an observation of his friend. "He don't seem to care about his dress," thought Tom, "and yet how capitally he does it. What an easy swell he is!"

Mr. James Harthouse, happening to catch Tom's eye, remarked that he drank nothing, and filled his glass with his own negligent hand.

"Thank'ee," said Tom. "Thank'ee. Well, Mr. Hart-

house, I hope you have had about a dose of old Bounderby to-night." Tom said this with one eye shut up again, and looking over his glass knowingly, at his entertainer.

"A very good fellow indeed!" returned Mr. James Harthouse.

"You think so, don't you?" said Tom. And shut up his eye again.

Mr. James Harthouse smiled; and rising from his end of the sofa, and lounging with his back against the chimney-piece, so that he stood before the empty fire-grate as he smoked, in front of Tom and looking down at him, observed:

"What a comical brother-in-law you are!"

"What a comical brother-in-law old Bounderby is, I think you mean," said Tom.

"You are a piece of caustic, Tom," retorted Mr. James Harthouse.

There was something so very agreeable in being so intimate with such a waistcoat; in being called Tom, in such an intimate way, by such a voice; in being on such off-hand terms so soon, with such a pair of whiskers; that Tom was uncommonly pleased with himself.

"Oh! I don't care for old Bounderby," said he, "if you mean that. I have always called old Bounderby by the same name when I have talked about him, and I have always thought of him in the same way. I am not going to begin to be polite now, about old Bounderby. It would be rather late in the day."

"Don't mind me," returned James; "but take care when his wife is by, you know."

"His wife?" said Tom. "My sister Loo? O yes!" And he laughed, and took a little more of the cooling drink.

James Harthouse continued to lounge in the same place and attitude, smoking his cigar in his own easy way, and looking pleasantly at the whelp, as if he knew himself to be a kind of agreeable demon who had only to hover over him, and he must give up his whole soul if required. It certainly did seem that the whelp yielded to this influence. He looked at his companion sneakingly, he looked at him admiringly, he looked at him boldly, and put up one leg on the sofa.

"My sister Loo?" said Tom. "*She* never cared for old Bounderby."

"That's the past tense, Tom," returned Mr. James Harthouse, striking the ash from his cigar with his little finger. "We are in the present tense, now."

"Verb neuter, not to care. Indicative mood, present tense. First person singular, I do not care; second person singular, thou dost not care; third person singular, she does not care," returned Tom.

"Good! Very quaint!" said his friend. "Though you don't mean it."

"But I *do* mean it," cried Tom. "Upon my honour! Why, you won't tell me, Mr. Harthouse, that you really supposed my sister Loo does care for old Bounderby."

"My dear fellow," returned the other, "what am I bound to suppose, when I find two married people living in harmony and happiness?"

Tom had by this time got both his legs on the sofa. If his second leg had not been already there when he was called a dear fellow, he would have put it up at that great stage of the conversation. Feeling it necessary to do something then, he stretched himself out at greater length, and, reclining with the back of his head on the end of the sofa, and smoking with an infinite assumption of negligence, turned his common face, and not too sober eyes, towards the face looking down upon him so carelessly yet so potently.

"You know our governor, Mr. Harthouse," said Tom, "and therefore you needn't be surprised that Loo married old Bounderby. She never had a lover, and the governor proposed old Bounderby, and she took him."

"Very dutiful in your interesting sister," said Mr. James Harthouse.

"Yes, but she wouldn't have been as dutiful, and it would not have come off as easily," returned the whelp, "if it hadn't been for me."

The tempter merely lifted his eyebrows; but the whelp was obliged to go on.

"*I* persuaded her," he said, with an edifying air of superiority. "I was stuck into old Bounderby's bank (where I never wanted to be), and I knew I should get into scrapes there, if she put old Bounderby's pipe out; so I told her my wishes, and she came into them. She would do anything for me. It was very game of her, wasn't it?"

"It was charming, Tom!"

"Not that it was altogether so important to her as it was

to me," continued Tom coolly, "because my liberty and comfort, and perhaps my getting on, depended on it; and she had no other lover, and staying at home was like staying in jail—especially when I was gone. It wasn't as if she gave up another lover for old Bounderby; but still it was a good thing in her."

"Perfectly delightful. And she gets on so placidly."

"Oh," returned Tom, with contemptuous patronage, "she's a regular girl. A girl can get on anywhere. She has settled down to the life, and *she* don't mind. It does just as well as another. Besides, though Loo is a girl, she's not a common sort of girl. She can shut herself up within herself, and think—as I have often known her sit and watch the fire—for an hour at a stretch."

"Ay, ay? Has resources of her own," said Harthouse, smoking quietly.

"Not so much of that as you may suppose," returned Tom; "for our governor had her crammed with all sorts of dry bones and sawdust. It's his system."

"Formed his daughter on his own model?" suggested Harthouse.

"His daughter? Ah! and everybody else. Why he formed Me that way," said Tom.

"Impossible!"

"He did, though," said Tom, shaking his head. "I mean to say, Mr. Harthouse, that when I first left home and went to old Bounderby's, I was as flat as a warming-pan, and knew no more about life, than any oyster does."

"Come, Tom! I can hardly believe that. A joke's a joke."

"Upon my soul!" said the whelp. "I am serious; I am indeed!" He smoked with great gravity and dignity for a little while, and then added, in a highly complacent tone, "Oh! I have picked up a little since. I don't deny that. But I have done it myself; no thanks to the governor."

"And your intelligent sister?"

"My intelligent sister is about where she was. She used to complain to me that she had nothing to fall back upon, that girls usually fall back upon; and I don't see how she is to have got over that since. But *she* don't mind," he sagaciously added, puffing at his cigar again. "Girls can always get on, somehow."

"Calling at the Bank yesterday evening, for Mr. Bound-

erby's address, I found an ancient lady there, who seems to entertain great admiration for your sister," observed Mr. James Harthouse, throwing away the last small remnant of the cigar he had now smoked out.

"Mother Sparsit!" said Tom. "What! you have seen her already, have you?"

His friend nodded. Tom took his cigar out of his mouth, to shut up his eye (which had grown rather unmanageable) with the greater expression, and to tap his nose several times with his finger.

"Mother Sparsit's feeling for Loo is more than admiration, I should think," said Tom. "Say affection and devotion. Mother Sparsit never set her cap at Bounderby when he was a bachelor. Oh no!"

These were the last words spoken by the whelp, before a giddy drowsiness came upon him, followed by complete oblivion. He was roused from the latter state by an uneasy dream of being stirred up with a boot, and also of a voice saying: "Come, it's late. Be off!"

"Well!" he said, scrambling from the sofa. "I must take my leave of you though. I say. Yours is very good tobacco. But it's too mild."

"Yes, it's too mild," returned his entertainer.

"It's—it's ridiculously mild," said Tom. "Where's the door! Good night!"

He had another odd dream of being taken by a waiter through a mist, which, after giving him some trouble and difficulty, resolved itself into the main street, in which he stood alone. He then walked home pretty easily, though not yet free from an impression of the presence and influence of his new friend—as if he were lounging somewhere in the air, in the same negligent attitude, regarding him with the same look.

The whelp went home, and went to bed. If he had had any sense of what he had done that night, and had been less of a whelp and more of a brother, he might have turned short on the road, might have gone down to the ill-smelling river that was dyed black, might have gone to bed in it for good and all, and have curtained his head for ever with its filthy waters.

CHAPTER IV.

MEN AND BROTHERS.

"Oh my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! Oh my friends and fellow-countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism! Oh my friends and fellow-sufferers, and fellow-workmen, and fellow-men! I tell you that the hour is come, when we must rally round one another as One united power, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battened upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labour of our hands, upon the strength of our sinews, upon the God-created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood!"

"Good!" "Hear, hear, hear!" "Hurrah!" and other cries, arose in many voices from various parts of the densely crowded and suffocatingly close Hall, in which the orator, perched on a stage, delivered himself of this and what other froth and fume he had in him. He had declaimed himself into a violent heat, and was as hoarse as he was hot. By dint of roaring at the top of his voice under a flaring gas-light, clenching his fists, knitting his brows, setting his teeth, and pounding with his arms, he had taken so much out of himself by this time, that he was brought to a stop, and called for a glass of water.

As he stood there, trying to quench his fiery face with his drink of water, the comparison between the orator and the crowd of attentive faces turned towards him, was extremely to his disadvantage. Judging him by Nature's evidence, he was above the mass in very little but the stage on which he stood. In many great respects he was essentially below them. He was not so honest, he was not so manly, he was not so good-humoured; he substituted cunning for their simplicity, and passion for their safe solid sense. An ill-made, high-shouldered man, with lowering brows, and his features crushed into an habitually sour expression, he contrasted most unfavourably, even in his mongrel dress, with the great body of his hearers in their plain working clothes. Strange as it always is to consider

any assembly in the act of submissively resigning itself to the dreariness of some complacent person, lord or commoner, whom three-fourths of it could, by no human means, raise out of the slough of inanity to their own intellectual level, it was particularly strange, and it was even particularly affecting, to see this crowd of earnest faces, whose honesty in the main no competent observer free from bias could doubt, so agitated by such a leader.

Good! Hear, hear! Hurrah! The eagerness both of attention and intention, exhibited in all the countenances, made them a most impressive sight. There was no carelessness, no languor, no idle curiosity; none of the many shades of indifference to be seen in all other assemblies, visible for one moment there. That every man felt his condition to be, somehow or other, worse than it might be; that every man considered it incumbent on him to join the rest, towards the making of it better; that every man felt his only hope to be in his allying himself to the comrades by whom he was surrounded; and that in this belief, right or wrong (unhappily wrong then), the whole of that crowd were gravely, deeply, faithfully in earnest; must have been as plain to any one who chose to see what was there, as the bare beams of the roof and the whitened brick walls. Nor could any such spectator fail to know in his own breast, that these men, through their very delusions, showed great qualities, susceptible of being turned to the happiest and best account; and that to pretend (on the strength of sweeping axioms, howsoever cut and dried) that they went astray wholly without cause, and of their own irrational wills, was to pretend that there could be smoke without fire, death without birth, harvest without seed, anything or everything produced from nothing.

The orator having refreshed himself, wiped his corrugated forehead from left to right several times with his handkerchief folded into a pad, and concentrated all his revived forces, in a sneer of great disdain and bitterness.

"But, oh my friends and brothers! Oh men and Englishmen, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! What shall we say of that man—that working-man, that I should find it necessary so to libel the glorious name—who, being practically and well acquainted with the grievances and wrongs of you, the injured pith and marrow of this land, and having heard you, with a noble and majestic unanimity

that will make Tyrants tremble, resolve for to subscribe to the funds of the United Aggregate Tribunal, and to abide by the injunctions issued by that body for your benefit, whatever they may be—what, I ask you, will you say of that working-man, since such I must acknowledge him to be, who, at such a time, deserts his post, and sells his flag; who, at such a time, turns a traitor and a craven and a recreant; who, at such a time, is not ashamed to make to you the dastardly and humiliating avowal that he will hold himself aloof, and will *not* be one of those associated in the gallant stand for Freedom and for Right?"

The assembly was divided at this point. There were some groans and hisses, but the general sense of honour was much too strong for the condemnation of a man unheard. "Be sure you're right, Slackbridge!" "Put him up!" "Let's hear him!" Such things were said on many sides. Finally, one strong voice called out, "Is the man heer? If the man's heer, Slackbridge, let's hear the man himseln, 'stead o' yo." Which was received with a round of applause.

Slackbridge, the orator, looked about him with a withering smile; and, holding out his right hand at arm's length (as the manner of all Slackbridges is), to still the thundering sea, waited until there was a profound silence.

"Oh my friends and fellow-men!" said Slackbridge then, shaking his head with violent scorn, "I do not wonder that you, the prostrate sons of labour, are incredulous of the existence of such a man. But he who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage existed, and Judas Iscariot existed, and Castlereagh existed, and this man exists!"

Here, a brief press and confusion near the stage, ended in the man himself standing at the orator's side before the concourse. He was pale and a little moved in the face—his lips especially showed it; but he stood quiet, with his left hand at his chin, waiting to be heard. There was a chairman to regulate the proceedings, and this functionary now took the case into his own hands.

"My friends," said he, "by virtue o' my office as your president, I ashes o' our friend Slackbridge, who may be a little over hetter in this business, to take his seat, whiles this man Stephen Blackpool is heern. You all know this man Stephen Blackpool. You know him awlung o' his misfort'ns, and his good name."

With that, the chairman shook him frankly by the hand, and sat down again. Slackbridge likewise sat down, wiping his hot forehead—always from left to right, and never the reverse way.

"My friends," Stephen began, in the midst of a dead calm; "I ha' hed what's been spok'n o' me, and 'tis lickly that I shan't mend it. But I'd liefer you'd hearn the truth concernin myseln, fro my lips than fro onny other man's, though I never cud'n speak afore so monny, wi'out bein moydert and muddled."

Slackbridge shook his head as if he would shake it off, in his bitterness.

"I'm th' one single Hand in Bounderby's mill, o' a' the men theer, as don't coom in wi' th' proposed reg'lations. I canna' coom in wi' 'em. My friends, I doubt their doin' yo onny good. Licker they'll do yo hurt."

Slackbridge laughed, folded his arms, and frowned sarcastically.

"But 't aut sommuch for that as I stands out. If that were aw, I'd coom in wi' th' rest. But I ha' my reasons —mine, you see—for being hindered; not on'y now, but awlus—awlus—life long!"

Slackbridge jumped up and stood beside him, gnashing and tearing. "Oh my friends, what but this did I tell you? Oh my fellow-countrymen, what warning but this did I give you? And how shows this recreant conduct in a man on whom unequal laws are known to have fallen heavy? Oh you Englishmen, I ask you how does this subornation show in one of yourselves, who is thus consenting to his own undoing and to yours, and to your children's and your children's children's?"

There was some applause, and some crying of Shame upon the man; but the greater part of the audience were quiet. They looked at Stephen's worn face, rendered more pathetic by the homely emotions it evinced; and, in the kindness of their nature, they were more sorry than indignant.

"'Tis this Delegate's trade for t' speak," said Stephen, "an' he's paid for 't, an he knows his work. Let him keep to 't. Let him give no heed to what I ha had'n to bear. That's not for him. That's not for nobbody but me."

There was a propriety, not to say a dignity in these words, that made the hearers yet more quiet and attentive.

The same strong voice called out, "Slackbridge, let the man be heern, and howd thee tongue!" Then the place was wonderfully still.

"My brothers," said Stephen, whose low voice was distinctly heard, "and my fellow-workmen—for that yo are to me, though not, as I knows on, to this delegate here—I ha but a word to sen, and I could sen nommore if I was to speak till Strike o' day. I know weel, aw what's afore me. I know weel that yo aw resolve to ha nommore ado wi' a man who is not wi' yo in this matther. I know weel that if I was a lyin parisht i' th' road, yo'd feel it right to pass me by, as a forrenner and stranger. What I ha getn, I mun mak th' best on."

"Stephen Blackpool," said the chairman, rising, "think on't agen. Think on't once agen, lad, afore thour't shunned by aw owd friends."

There was an universal murmur to the same effect, though no man articulated a word. Every eye was fixed on Stephen's face. To repent of his determination, would be to take a load from all their minds. He looked around him, and knew that it was so. Not a grain of anger with them was in his heart; he knew them, far below their surface weaknesses and misconceptions, as no one but their fellow-labourer could.

"I ha thowt on't, above a bit, sir. I simply canna coom in. I mun go th' way as lays afore me. I mun tak my leave o' aw heer."

He made a sort of reverence to them by holding up his arms, and stood for the moment in that attitude: not speaking until they slowly dropped at his sides.

"Monny's the pleasant word as soom heer has spok'n wi' me; monny's the face I see heer, as I first seen when I were yoong and lighter heart'n than now. I ha' never had no fratch afore, sin ever I were born, wi' any o' my like; Gonnows I ha' none now that's o' my makin'. Yo'll ca' me traitor and that—yo I mean t' say," addressing Slackbridge, "but 'tis easier to ca' than mak' out. So let be."

He had moved away a pace or two to come down from the platform, when he remembered something he had not said, and returned again.

"Haply," he said, turning his furrowed face slowly about, that he might as it were individually address the

whole audience, those both near and distant; "haply, when this question has been tak'n up and discoosed, there'll be a threat to turn out if I'm let to work among yo. I hope I shall die ere ever such a time cooms, and I shall work solitary among yo unless it cooms—truly, I mun do't, my friends; not to brave yo, but to live. I ha nobbut work to live by; and wheerever can I go, I who ha worked sin I were no heighth at aw, in Coketown heer? I mak' no complaints o' bein turned to the wa', o' being outcasten and overlooken fro this time forrard, but I hope I shall be let to work. If there is any right for me at aw, my friends, I think 'tis that."

Not a word was spoken. Not a sound was audible in the building, but the slight rustle of men moving a little apart, all along the centre of the room, to open a means of passing out, to the man with whom they had all bound themselves to renounce companionship. Looking at no one, and going his way with a lowly steadiness upon him that asserted nothing and sought nothing, Old Stephen, with all his troubles on his head, left the scene.

Then Slackbridge, who had kept his oratorical arm extended during the going out, as if he were repressing with infinite solicitude and by a wonderful moral power the vehement passions of the multitude, applied himself to raising their spirits. Had not the Roman Brutus, oh my British countrymen, condemned his son to death; and had not the Spartan mothers, oh my soon to be victorious friends, driven their flying children on the points of their enemies' swords? Then was it not the sacred duty of the men of Coketown, with forefathers before them, an admiring world in company with them, and a posterity to come after them, to hurl out traitors from the tents they had pitched in a sacred and a Godlike cause? The winds of heaven answered Yes; and bore Yes, east, west, north, and south. And consequently three cheers for the United Aggregate Tribunal!

Slackbridge acted as fugleman, and gave the time. The multitude of doubtful faces (a little conscience stricken) brightened at the sound, and took it up. Private feeling must yield to the common cause. Hurrah! The roof yet vibrated with the cheering, when the assembly dispersed.

Thus easily did Stephen Blackpool fall into the loneliest of lives, the life of solitude among a familiar crowd. The stranger in the land who looks into ten thousand faces for

some answering look and never finds it, is in cheering society as compared with him who passes ten averted faces daily, that were once the countenances of friends. Such experience was to be Stephen's now, in every waking moment of his life; at his work, on his way to it and from it, at his door, at his window, everywhere. By general consent, they even avoided that side of the street on which he habitually walked; and left it, of all the working-men, to him only.

He had been for many years, a quiet silent man, associating but little with other men, and used to companionship with his own thoughts. He had never known before the strength of the want in his heart for the frequent recognition of a nod, a look, a word; or the immense amount of relief that had been poured into it by drops through such small means. It was even harder than he could have believed possible, to separate in his own conscience his abandonment by all his fellows from a baseless sense of shame and disgrace.

The first four days of his endurance were days so long and heavy, that he began to be appalled by the prospect before him. Not only did he see no Rachael all the time, but he avoided every chance of seeing her; for, although he knew that the prohibition did not yet formally extend to the women working in the factories, he found that some of them with whom he was acquainted were changed to him, and he feared to try others, and dreaded that Rachael might be even singled out from the rest if she were seen in his company. So, he had been quite alone during the four days, and had spoken to no one, when, as he was leaving his work at night, a young man of a very light complexion accosted him in the street.

"Your name's Blackpool, ain't it?" said the young man.

Stephen coloured to find himself with his hat in his hand, in his gratitude for being spoken to, or in the suddenness of it, or both. He made a feint of adjusting the lining, and said, "Yes."

"You are the Hand they have sent to Coventry, I mean?" said Bitzer, the very light young man in question.

Stephen answered "Yes," again.

"I supposed so, from their all appearing to keep away from you. Mr. Bounderby wants to speak to you. You know his house, don't you?"

Stephen said "Yes," again.

"Then go straight up there, will you?" said Bitzer. "You're expected, and have only to tell the servant it's you. I belong to the Bank; so, if you go straight up without me (I was sent to fetch you), you'll save me a walk."

Stephen, whose way had been in the contrary direction, turned about, and betook himself as in duty bound, to the red brick castle of the giant Bounderby.

CHAPTER V.

MEN AND MASTERS.

"WELL, Stephen," said Bounderby, in his windy manner, "what's this I hear? What have these pests of the earth been doing to *you?* Come in, and speak up."

It was into the drawing-room that he was thus bidden. A tea-table was set out; and Mr. Bounderby's young wife, and her brother, and a great gentleman from London, were present. To whom Stephen made his obeisance, closing the door and standing near it, with his hat in his hand.

"This is the man I was telling you about, Harthouse," said Mr. Bounderby. The gentleman he addressed, who was talking to Mrs. Bounderby on the sofa, got up, saying in an indolent way, "Oh really?" and dawdled to the hearth-rug where Mr. Bounderby stood.

"Now," said Bounderby, "speak up!"

After the four days he had passed, this address fell rudely and discordantly on Stephen's ear. Besides being a rough handling of his wounded mind, it seemed to assume that he really was the self-interested deserter he had been called.

"What were it, sir," said Stephen, "as yo were pleased to want wi' me?"

"Why, I have told you," returned Bounderby. "Speak up like a man, since you are a man, and tell us about yourself and this Combination."

"Wi' yor pardon, sir," said Stephen Blackpool, "I ha' nowt to sen about it."

Mr. Bounderby, who was always more or less like a Wind, finding something in his way here, began to blow at it directly.

"Now, look here, Harthouse," said he, "here's a specimen of 'em. When this man was here once before, I warned this man against the mischievous strangers who are always about—and who ought to be hanged wherever they are found—and I told this man that he was going in the wrong direction. Now, would you believe it, that although they have put this mark upon him, he is such a slave to them still, that he's afraid to open his lips about them?"

"I sed as I had nowt to sen, sir; not as I was fearfo' o' openin' my lips."

"You said. Ah! *I* know what you said; more than that, I know what you mean, you see. Not always the same thing, by the Lord Harry! Quite different things. You had better tell us at once, that that fellow Slackbridge is not in the town, stirring up the people to mutiny; and that he is not a regular qualified leader of the people: that is, a most confounded scoundrel. You had better tell us so at once; you can't deceive me. You want to tell us so. Why don't you?"

"I'm as sooary as yo, sir, when the people's leaders is bad," said Stephen, shaking his head. "They taks such as offers. Haply 'tis na' the sma'est o' their misfortuns when they can get no better."

The wind began to get boisterous.

"Now, you'll think this pretty well, Harthouse," said Mr. Bounderby. "You'll think this tolerably strong. You'll say, upon my soul this is a tidy specimen of what my friends have to deal with; but this is nothing, sir! You shall hear me ask this man a question. Pray, Mr. Blackpool"—wind springing up very fast—"may I take the liberty of asking you how it happens that you refused to be in this Combination?"

"How't happens?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Bounderby, with his thumbs in the arms of his coat, and jerking his head and shutting his eyes in confidence with the opposite wall: "how it happens."

"I'd leefer not coom to't, sir; but sin you put th' question—an not want'n t' be ill-manner'n—I'll answer. I ha passed a promess."

"Not to me, you know," said Bounderby. (Gusty weather with deceitful calms. One now prevailing.)

"O no, sir. Not to yo."

"As for me, any consideration for me has had just nothing at all to do with it," said Bounderby, still in confidence with the wall. "If only Josiah Bounderby of Coketown had been in question, you would have joined and made no bones about it?"

"Why yes, sir. 'Tis true."

"Though he knows," said Mr. Bounderby, now blowing a gale, "that there are a set of rascals and rebels whom transportation is too good for! Now, Mr. Harthouse, you have been knocking about in the world some time. Did you ever meet with anything like that man out of this blessed country?" And Mr. Bounderby pointed him out for inspection, with an angry finger.

"Nay, ma'am," said Stephen Blackpool, staunchly protesting against the words that had been used, and instinctively addressing himself to Louisa, after glancing at her face. "Not rebels, nor yet rascals. Nowt o' th' kind, ma'am, nowt o' th' kind. They've not doon me a kindness, ma'am, as I know and feel. But there's not a dozen men amoong 'em, ma'am—a dozen? Not six—but what believes as he has doon his duty by the rest and by himseln. God forbid as I, that ha known, and had'n experience o' these men aw my life—I, that ha ett'n an droonken wi' 'em, an seet'n wi' 'em, and toil'n wi' 'em, and lov'n 'em, should fail fur to stan by 'em wi' the truth, let 'em ha doon to me what they may!"

He spoke with the rugged earnestness of his place and character—deepened perhaps by a proud consciousness that he was faithful to his class under all their mistrust; but he fully remembered where he was, and did not even raise his voice.

"No, ma'am, no. They're true to one another, faithfo' to one another, fectionate to one another, e'en to death. Be poor amoong 'em, be sick amoong 'em, grieve amoong 'em for onny o' th' monny causes that carries grieve to the poor man's door, and they'll be tender wi' yo, gentle wi' yo, comfortable wi' yo, Chrisen wi' yo. Be sure o' that, ma'am. They'd be riven to bits, ere ever they'd be different."

"In short," said Mr. Bounderby, "it's because they are so full of virtues that they have turned you adrift. Go through with it while you are about it. Out with it."

"How 'tis, ma'am," resumed Stephen, appearing still to

find his natural refuge in Louisa's face, "that what is best in us fok, seems to turn us the most to trouble an misfort'n an mistake, I dunno. But 'tis so. I know 'tis, as I know the heavens is over me ahint the smoke. We're patient too, an wants in general to do right. An' I canna think the fawt is aw wi' us."

"Now, my friend," said Mr. Bounderby, whom he could not have exasperated more, quite unconscious of it though he was, than by seeming to appeal to any one else, "if you will favour me with your attention for half a minute, I should like to have a word or two with you. You said just now, that you had nothing to tell us about this business. You are quite sure of that before we go any further."

"Sir, I am sure on't."

"Here's a gentleman from London present," Mr. Bounderby made a backhanded point at Mr. James Harthouse with his thumb, "a Parliament gentleman. I should like him to hear a short bit of dialogue between you and me, instead of taking the substance of it—for I know precious well, beforehand, what it will be; nobody knows better than I do, take notice!—instead of receiving it on trust from my mouth."

Stephen bent his head to the gentleman from London, and showed a rather more troubled mind than usual. He turned his eyes involuntarily to his former refuge, but at a look from that quarter (expressive though instantaneous) he settled them on Mr. Bounderby's face.

"Now, what do you complain of?" asked Mr. Bounderby.

"I ha' not coom here, sir," Stephen reminded him, "to complain. I coom for that I were sent for."

"What," repeated Mr. Bounderby, folding his arms, "do you people, in a general way, complain of?"

Stephen looked at him with some little irresolution for a moment, and then seemed to make up his mind.

"Sir, I were never good at showing o 't, though I ha had'n my share in feeling o 't. 'Deed we are in a muddle, sir. Look round town—so rich as 'tis—and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an to card, an to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehows, twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, and wheer we live, an in what numbers, an by what chances, and wi' what sameness; and look how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no

nigher to ony dis'ant object—ceptin awlus, Death. Look how you considers of us, and writes of us, and talks of us, and goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us, and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong, and never had'n no reason in us sin ever we were born. Look how this ha growen an growen, sir, bigger an bigger, broader an broader, harder an harder, fro year to year, fro generation unto generation. Who can look on 't, sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?"

"Of course," said Mr. Bounderby. "Now perhaps you'll let the gentleman know, how you would set this muddle (as you're so fond of calling it) to rights."

"I donno, sir. I canna be expecten to 't. 'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, sir, if not to do 't?"

"I'll tell you something towards it, at any rate," returned Mr. Bounderby. "We will make an example of half a dozen Slackbridges. We'll indict the blackguards for felony, and get 'em shipped off to penal settlements."

Stephen gravely shook his head.

"Don't tell me we won't, man," said Mr. Bounderby, by this time blowing a hurricane, "because we will, I tell you!"

"Sir," returned Stephen, with the quiet confidence of absolute certainty, "if yo was t' tak a hundred Slackbridges—aw as there is, and aw the number ten times towd —an' was t' sew 'em up in separate sacks, an sink 'em in the deepest ocean as were made ere ever dry land coom to be, yo'd leave the muddle just wheer 'tis. Mischeevous strangers!" said Stephen, with an anxious smile; "when ha we not heern, I am sure, sin ever we can call to mind, o' th' mischeevous strangers! 'Tis not by *them* the trouble's made, sir. 'Tis not wi' *them* 't commences. I ha no favour for 'em—I ha no reason to favour 'em—but 'tis hopeless and useless to dream o' takin them fro their trade, 'stead o' takin their trade fro them! Aw that's now about me in this room were heer afore I coom, an will be heer when I am gone. Put that clock aboard a ship an pack it off to Norfolk Island, an the time will go on just the same. So 'tis wi' Slackbridge every bit."

Reverting for a moment to his former refuge, he observed a cautionary movement of her eyes towards the door.

Stepping back, he put his hand upon the lock. But he had not spoken out of his own will and desire; and he felt it in his heart a noble return for his late injurious treatment to be faithful to the last to those who had repudiated him. He stayed to finish what was in his mind.

"Sir, I canna, wi' my little learning an my common way, tell the genelman what will better aw this—though some working-men o' this town could, above my powers—but I can tell him what I know will never do 't. The strong hand will never do 't. Vict'ry and triumph will never do 't. Agreeing fur to mak one side unnat'rally awlus and for ever right, and toother side unnat'rally awlus and for ever wrong, will never, never do 't. Nor yet lettin alone will never do 't. Let thousands upon thousands alone, aw leading the like lives and aw faw'en into the like muddle, and they will be as one, and yo will be as anoother, wi' a black unpassable world betwixt yo, just as long or short a time as sitch-like misery can last. Not drawin nigh to fok, wi' kindness and patience an cheery ways, that so draws nigh to one another in their monny troubles, and so cherishes one another in their distresses wi' what they need themseln—like, I humbly believe, as no people the genelman ha seen in aw his travels can beat—will never do 't till th' Sun turns t' ice. Most o' aw, rating 'em as so much Power, and reg'latin 'em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines: wi'out loves and likens, wi'out memories and inclinations, wi'out souls to weary and souls to hope—when aw goes quiet, draggin on wi' 'em as if they'd nowt o' th' kind, and when aw goes onquiet, reproachin 'em for their want o' sitch humanly feelins in their dealins wi' yo—this will never do 't, sir, till God's work is onmade."

Stephen stood with the open door in his hand, waiting to know if anything more were expected of him.

"Just stop a moment," said Mr. Bounderby, excessively red in the face. "I told you, the last time you were here with a grievance, that you had better turn about and come out of that. And I also told you, if you remember, that I was up to the gold spoon lookout."

"I were not up to 't myseln, sir; I do assure yo."

"Now it's clear to me," said Mr. Bounderby, "that you are one of those chaps who have always got a grievance. And you go about, sowing it and raising crops. That's the business of *your* life, my friend."

Stephen shook his head, mutely protesting that indeed he had other business to do for his life.

"You are such a waspish, raspish, ill-conditioned chap, you see," said Mr. Bounderby, "that even your own Union, the men who know you best, will have nothing to do with you. I never thought those fellows could be right in anything; but I tell you what! I so far go along with them for a novelty, that *I'll* have nothing to do with you either."

Stephen raised his eyes quickly to his face.

"You can finish off what you're at," said Mr. Bounderby, with a meaning nod, "and then go elsewhere."

"Sir, yo know weel," said Stephen expressively, "that if I canna get work wi' yo, I canna get it elsewheer."

The reply was, "What I know, I know; and what you know, you know. I have no more to say about it."

Stephen glanced at Louisa again, but her eyes were raised to his no more; therefore, with a sigh, and saying, barely above his breath, "Heaven help us aw in this world!" he departed.

CHAPTER VI.

FADING AWAY.

It was falling dark when Stephen came out of Mr. Bounderby's house. The shadows of night had gathered so fast, that he did not look about him when he closed the door, but plodded straight along the street. Nothing was further from his thoughts than the curious old woman he had encountered on his previous visit to the same house, when he heard a step behind him that he knew, and turning, saw her in Rachael's company.

He saw Rachael first, as he had heard her only.

"Ah, Rachael, my dear! Missus, thou wi' her!"

"Well, and now you are surprised to be sure, and with reason I must say," the old woman returned. "Here I am again, you see."

"But how wi' Rachael?" said Stephen, falling into their step, walking between them, and looking from the one to the other.

"Why, I come to be with this good lass pretty much as

I came to be with you," said the old woman, cheerfully, taking the reply upon herself. "My visiting time is later this year than usual, for I have been rather troubled with shortness of breath, and so put it off till the weather was fine and warm. For the same reason I don't make all my journey in one day, but divide it into two days, and get a bed to-night at the Travellers' Coffee House down by the railroad (a nice clean house), and go back Parliamentary, at six in the morning. Well, but what has this to do with this good lass, says you? I'm going to tell you. I have heard of Mr. Bounderby being married. I read it in the paper, where it looked grand—oh, it looked fine!" the old woman dwelt on it with strange enthusiasm: "and I want to see his wife. I have never seen her yet. Now if you'll believe me, she hasn't come out of that house since noon to-day. So not to give her up too easily, I was waiting about, a little last bit more, when I passed close to this good lass two or three times; and her face being so friendly I spoke to her, and she spoke to me. There!" said the old woman to Stephen, "you can make all the rest out for yourself now, a deal shorter than I can, I dare say!"

Once again, Stephen had to conquer an instinctive propensity to dislike this old woman, though her manner was as honest and simple as a manner possibly could be. With a gentleness that was as natural to him as he knew it to be to Rachael, he pursued the subject that interested her in her old age.

"Well, missus," said he, "I ha seen the lady, and she were young and hansom. Wi' fine dark thinkin eyes, and a still way, Rachael, as I ha never seen the like on."

"Young and handsome. Yes!" cried the old woman, quite delighted. "As bonny as a rose! And what a happy wife!"

"Aye, missus, I suppose she be," said Stephen. But with a doubtful glance at Rachael.

"Suppose she be? She must be. She's your master's wife," returned the old woman.

Stephen nodded assent. "Though as to master," said he, glancing again at Rachael, "not master onny more. That's aw enden twixt him and me."

"Have you left his work, Stephen?" asked Rachael, anxiously and quickly.

"Why Rachael," he replied, "whether I ha lef'n his

work, or whether his work ha lef'n me, cooms t' th' same. His work and me are parted. 'Tis as weel so—better, I were thinkin when yo coom up wi' me. It would ha brought'n trouble upon trouble if I had stayed theer. Haply 'tis a kindness to monny that I go; haply 'tis a kindness to myseln; anyways it mun be done. I mun turn my face fro Coketown fur th' time, and seek a fort'n, dear, by beginnin fresh."

"Where will you go, Stephen?"

"I donno t'night," said he, lifting off his hat, and smoothing his thin hair with the flat of his hand. "But I'm not goin t'night, Rachael, nor yet t'morrow. Tan't easy overmuch, t' know wheer t' turn, but a good heart will coom to me."

Herein, too, the sense of even thinking unselfishly aided him. Before he had so much as closed Mr. Bounderby's door, he had reflected that at least his being obliged to go away was good for her, as it would save her from the chance of being brought into question for not withdrawing from him. Though it would cost him a hard pang to leave her, and though he could think of no similar place in which his condemnation would not pursue him, perhaps it was almost a relief to be forced away from the endurance of the last four days, even to unknown difficulties and distresses.

So he said, with truth, "I'm more leetsome, Rachael, under 't, than I could ha believed." It was not her part to make his burden heavier. She answered with her comforting smile, and the three walked on together.

Age, especially when it strives to be self-reliant and cheerful, finds much consideration among the poor. The old woman was so decent and contented, and made so light of her infirmities, though they had increased upon her since her former interview with Stephen, that they both took an interest in her. She was too sprightly to allow of their walking at a slow pace on her account, but she was very grateful to be talked to, and very willing to talk to any extent: so, when they came to their part of the town, she was more brisk and vivacious than ever.

"Coom to my poor place, missus," said Stephen, "and tak a coop o' tea. Rachael will coom then; and arterwards I'll see thee safe t' thy Travellers' lodgin. 'T may be long, Rachael, ere ever I ha th' chance o' thy coompany agen."

They complied, and the three went on to the house where he lodged. When they turned into a narrow street, Stephen glanced at his window with a dread that always haunted his desolate home; but it was open, as he had left it, and no one was there. The evil spirit of his life had flitted away again, months ago, and he had heard no more of her since. The only evidence of her last return now, were the scantier movables in his room, and the greyer hair upon his head.

He lighted a candle, set out his little tea-board, got hot water from below, and brought in small portions of tea and sugar, a loaf, and some butter from the nearest shop. The bread was new and crusty, the butter fresh, and the sugar lump, of course—in fulfilment of the standard testimony of the Coketown magnates, that these people lived like princes, sir. Rachael made the tea (so large a party necessitated the borrowing of a cup), and the visitor enjoyed it mightily. It was the first glimpse of sociality the host had had for many days. He too, with the world a wide heath before him, enjoyed the meal—again in corroboration of the magnates, as exemplifying the utter want of calculation on the part of these people, sir.

"I ha never thowt yet, missus," said Stephen, "o' askin thy name."

The old lady announced herself as "Mrs. Pegler."

"A widder, I think?" said Stephen.

"Oh, many long years!" Mrs. Pegler's husband (one of the best on record) was already dead, by Mrs. Pegler's calculation, when Stephen was born.

"'Twere a bad job, too, to lose so good a one," said Stephen. "Onny children?"

Mrs. Pegler's cup, rattling against her saucer as she held it, denoted some nervousness on her part. "No," she said. "Not now, not now."

"Dead, Stephen," Rachael softly hinted.

"I'm sooary I ha spok'n on 't," said Stephen, "I ought t' hadn in my mind as I might touch a sore place. I—I blame myseln."

While he excused himself, the old lady's cup rattled more and more. "I had a son," she said, curiously distressed, and not by any of the usual appearances of sorrow; "and he did well, wonderfully well. But he is not to be spoken of if you please. He is—" Putting down her cup, she

moved her hands as if she would have added, by her action, "dead!" Then she said aloud, "I have lost him."

Stephen had not yet got the better of his having given the old lady pain, when his landlady came stumbling up the narrow stairs, and calling him to the door, whispered in his ear. Mrs. Pegler was by no means deaf, for she caught a word as it was uttered.

"Bounderby!" she cried, in a suppressed voice, starting up from the table. "Oh hide me! Don't let me be seen for the world. Don't let him come up till I've got away. Pray, pray!" She trembled, and was excessively agitated; getting behind Rachael, when Rachael tried to reassure her; and not seeming to know what she was about.

"But hearken, missus, hearken;" said Stephen, astonished. "'Tisn't Mr. Bounderby; 'tis his wife. Yor not fearfo' o' her. Yo was hey-go-mad about her, but an hour sin."

"But are you sure it's the lady, and not the gentleman?" she asked, still trembling.

"Certain sure!"

"Well then, pray don't speak to me, nor yet take any notice of me," said the old woman. "Let me be quite to myself in this corner."

Stephen nodded; looking to Rachael for an explanation, which she was quite unable to give him; took the candle, went downstairs, and in a few moments returned, lighting Louisa into the room. She was followed by the whelp.

Rachael had risen, and stood apart with her shawl and bonnet in her hand, when Stephen, himself profoundly astonished by this visit, put the candle on the table. Then he too stood, with his doubled hand upon the table near it, waiting to be addressed.

For the first time in her life Louisa had come into one of the dwellings of the Coketown Hands; for the first time in her life she was face to face with anything like individuality in connection with them. She knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands. She knew what results in work a given number of them would produce in a given space of time. She knew them in crowds passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles. But she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women.

Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws, and floundered into difficulty; something that was a little pinched when wheat was dear, and over-ate itself when wheat was cheap; something that increased at such a rate of percentage, and yielded such another percentage of crime, and such another percentage of pauperism; something wholesale, of which vast fortunes were made; something that occasionally rose like a sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again; this she knew the Coketown Hands to be. But, she had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component drops.

She stood for some moments looking round the room. From the few chairs, the few books, the common prints, and the bed, she glanced to the two women, and to Stephen.

"I have come to speak to you, in consequence of what passed just now. I should like to be serviceable to you, if you will let me. Is this your wife?"

Rachael raised her eyes, and they sufficiently answered no, and dropped again.

"I remember," said Louisa, reddening at her mistake; "I recollect, now, to have heard your domestic misfortunes spoken of, though I was not attending to the particulars at the time. It was not my meaning to ask a question that would give pain to any one here. If I should ask any other question that may happen to have that result, give me credit, if you please, for being in ignorance how to speak to you as I ought."

As Stephen had but a little while ago instinctively addressed himself to her, so she now instinctively addressed herself to Rachael. Her manner was short and abrupt, yet faltering and timid.

"He has told you what has passed between himself and my husband? You would be his first resource, I think."

"I have heard the end of it, young lady," said Rachael.

"Did I understand, that, being rejected by one employer, he would probably be rejected by all? I thought he said as much?"

"The chances are very small, young lady—next to nothing—for a man who gets a bad name among them."

"What shall I understand that you mean by a bad name?"

"The name of being troublesome."

"Then, by the prejudices of his own class, and by the prejudices of the other, he is sacrificed alike? Are the two so deeply separated in this town, that there is no place whatever, for an honest workman between them?"

Rachael shook her head in silence.

"He fell into suspicion," said Louisa, "with his fellow-weavers, because he had made a promise not to be one of them. I think it must have been to you that he made that promise. Might I ask you why he made it?"

Rachael burst into tears. "I didn't seek it of him, poor lad. I prayed him to avoid trouble for his own good, little thinking he'd come to it through me. But I know he'd die a hundred deaths, ere ever he'd break his word. I know that of him well."

Stephen had remained quietly attentive, in his usual thoughtful attitude, with his hand at his chin. He now spoke in a voice rather less steady than usual.

"No one, excepting myseln, can ever know what honour, an what love, an respect, I bear to Rachael, or wi' what cause. When I passed that promess, I towd her true, she were th' Angel o' my life. 'Twere a solemn promess. 'Tis gone fro' me, for ever."

Louisa turned her head to him, and bent it with a deference that was new in her. She looked from him to Rachael, and her features softened. "What will you do?" she asked him. And her voice had softened too.

"Weel, ma'am," said Stephen, making the best of it, with a smile; "when I ha finished off, I mun quit this part, and try another. Fortnet or misfortnet, a man can but try; there's nowt to be done wi'out tryin'—cept laying down and dying."

"How will you travel?"

"Afoot, my kind ledy, afoot."

Louisa coloured, and a purse appeared in her hand. The rustling of a bank-note was audible, as she unfolded one and laid it on the table.

"Rachael, will you tell him—for you know how, without offence—that this is freely his, to help him on his way? Will you entreat him to take it?"

"I canna do that, young lady," she answered, turning

her head aside; "bless you for thinking o' the poor lad wi' such tenderness. But 'tis for him to know his heart, and what is right according to it."

Louisa looked, in part incredulous, in part frightened, in part overcome with quick sympathy, when this man of so much self-command, who had been so plain and steady through the late interview, lost his composure in a moment, and now stood with his hand before his face. She stretched out hers, as if she would have touched him; then checked herself, and remained still.

"Not e'en Rachael," said Stephen, when he stood again with his face uncovered, "could mak sitch a kind offerin, by onny words, kinder. T' show that I'm not a man wi'-out reason and gratitude, I'll tak two pound. I'll borrow 't for t' pay 't back. 'Twill be the sweetest work as ever I had one, that puts it in my power t' acknowledge once more my lastin thankfulness for this present action."

She was fain to take up the note again, and to substitute the much smaller sum he had named. He was neither courtly, nor handsome, nor picturesque, in any respect; and yet his manner of accepting it, and of expressing his thanks without more words, had a grace in it that Lord Chesterfield could not have taught his son in a century.

Tom had sat upon the bed, swinging one leg and sucking his walking-stick with sufficient unconcern, until the visit had attained this stage. Seeing his sister ready to depart, he got up, rather hurriedly, and put in a word.

"Just wait a moment, Loo! Before we go, I should like to speak to him a moment. Something comes into my head. If you'll step out on the stairs, Blackpool, I'll mention it. Never mind a light, man!" Tom was remarkably impatient of his moving towards the cupboard, to get one. "It don't want a light."

Stephen followed him out, and Tom closed the room door, and held the lock in his hand.

"I say!" he whispered. "I think I can do you a good turn. Don't ask me what it is, because it may not come to anything. But there's no harm in my trying."

His breath fell like a flame of fire on Stephen's ear, it was so hot.

"That was our light porter at the Bank," said Tom, "who brought you the message to-night. I call him our light porter, because I belong to the Bank too."

Stephen thought, "What a hurry he is in!" He spoke so confusedly.

"Well!" said Tom. "Now look here! When are you off?"

"T' day's Monday," replied Stephen, considering. "Why, sir, Friday or Saturday, nigh 'bout."

"Friday or Saturday," said Tom. "Now, look here! I am not sure that I can do you the good turn I want to do you—that's my sister, you know, in your room—but I may be able to, and if I should not be able to, there's no harm done. So I tell you what. You'll know our light porter again?"

"Yes, sure," said Stephen.

"Very well," returned Tom. "When you leave work of a night, between this and your going away, just hang about the Bank an hour or so, will you? Don't take on, as if you meant anything, if he should see you hanging about there; because I shan't put him up to speak to you, unless I find I can do you the service I want to do you. In that case he'll have a note or a message for you, but not else. Now look here! You are sure you understand."

He had wormed a finger, in the darkness, through a buttonhole of Stephen's coat, and was screwing that corner of the garment tight up round and round, in an extraordinary manner.

"I understand, sir," said Stephen.

"Now look here!" repeated Tom. "Be sure you don't make any mistake then, and don't forget. I shall tell my sister as we go home, what I have in view, and she'll approve, I know. Now look here! You're all right, are you? You understand all about it? Very well then. Come along, Loo!"

He pushed the door open as he called to her, but did not return into the room, or wait to be lighted down the narrow stairs. He was at the bottom when she began to descend, and was in the street before she could take his arm.

Mrs. Pegler remained in her corner until the brother and sister were gone, and until Stephen came back with the candle in his hand. She was in a state of inexpressible admiration of Mrs. Bounderby, and, like an unaccountable old woman, wept, "because she was such a pretty dear." Yet Mrs. Pegler was so flurried lest the object of her admira-

tion should return by chance, or anybody else should come, that her cheerfulness was ended for that night. It was late too, to people who rose early and worked hard; therefore the party broke up; and Stephen and Rachael escorted their mysterious acquaintance to the door of the Travellers' Coffee House, where they parted from her.

They walked back together to the corner of the street where Rachael lived, and as they drew nearer and nearer to it, silence crept upon them. When they came to the dark corner where their unfrequent meetings always ended, they stopped, still silent, as if both were afraid to speak.

"I shall strive t' see thee agen, Rachael, afore I go, but if not——"

"Thou wilt not, Stephen, I know. 'Tis better that we make up our minds to be open wi' one another."

"Thou'rt awlus right. 'Tis bolder and better. I ha been thinkin then, Rachael, that as 'tis but a day or two that remains, 'twere better for thee, my dear, not t' be seen wi' me. 'T might bring thee into trouble, fur no good."

"'Tis not for that, Stephen, that I mind. But thou know'st our old agreement. 'Tis for that."

"Well, well," said he. "'Tis better, onnyways."

"Thou'lt write to me, and tell me all that happens, Stephen?"

"Yes. What can I say now, but Heaven be wi' thee, Heaven bless thee, Heaven thank thee and reward thee!"

"May it bless thee, Stephen, too, in all thy wanderings, and send thee peace and rest at last!"

"I towd thee, my dear," said Stephen Blackpool—"that night—that I would never see or think o' onnything that angered me, but thou, so much better than me, should'st be beside it. Thou'rt beside it now. Thou mak'st me see it wi' a better eye. Bless thee. Good night. Good bye!"

It was but a hurried parting in a common street, yet it was a sacred remembrance to these two common people. Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabblers of many little dog's-eared creeds, the poor you will have always with you. Cultivate in them, while there is yet time, the utmost graces of the fancies and affections, to adorn their lives so much in need of ornament; or, in the day of your triumph, when romance is utterly driven out of

their souls, and they and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of you.

Stephen worked the next day, and the next, uncheered by a word from any one, and shunned in all his comings and goings as before. At the end of the second day, he saw land; at the end of the third, his loom stood empty.

He had overstayed his hour in the street outside the Bank, on each of the two first evenings; and nothing had happened there, good or bad. That he might not be remiss in his part of the engagement, he resolved to wait full two hours, on this third and last night.

There was the lady who had once kept Mr. Bounderby's house, sitting at the first floor window as he had seen her before; and there was the light porter, sometimes talking with her there, and sometimes looking over the blind below which had BANK upon it, and sometimes coming to the door and standing on the steps for a breath of air. When he first came out, Stephen thought he might be looking for him, and passed near; but the light porter only cast his winking eyes upon him slightly, and said nothing.

Two hours were a long stretch of lounging about, after a long day's labour. Stephen sat upon the step of a door, leaned against a wall under an archway, strolled up and down, listened for the church clock, stopped and watched children playing in the street. Some purpose or other is so natural to every one, that a mere loiterer always looks and feels remarkable. When the first hour was out, Stephen even began to have an uncomfortable sensation upon him of being for the time the disreputable character.

Then came the lamplighter, and two lengthening lines of light all down the long perspective of the street, until they were blended and lost in the distance. Mrs. Sparsit closed the first floor window, drew down the blind, and went upstairs. Presently, a light went upstairs after her, passing first the fanlight of the door, and afterwards the two staircase windows, on its way up. By-and-bye, one corner of the second floor blind was disturbed, as if Mrs. Sparsit's eye were there; also the other corner, as if the light porter's eye were on that side. Still, no communication was made to Stephen. Much relieved when the two hours were at last accomplished, he went away at a quick pace, as a recompense for so much loitering.

He had only to take leave of his landlady, and lie down on his temporary bed upon the floor; for his bundle was made up for to-morrow, and all was arranged for his departure. He meant to be clear of the town very early; before the Hands were in the streets.

It was barely daybreak, when, with a parting look round his room, mournfully wondering whether he should ever see it again, he went out. The town was as entirely deserted as if the inhabitants had abandoned it, rather than hold communication with him. Everything looked wan at that hour. Even the coming sun made but a pale waste in the sky, like a sad sea.

By the place where Rachael lived, though it was not in his way; by the red brick streets; by the great silent factories, not trembling yet; by the railway, where the danger-lights were waning in the strengthening day; by the railway's crazy neighbourhood, half pulled down and half built up; by scattered red brick villas, where the besmoked evergreens were sprinkled with a dirty powder, like untidy snuff-takers; by coal-dust paths and many varieties of ugliness; Stephen got to the top of the hill, and looked back.

Day was shining radiantly upon the town then, and the bells were going for the morning work. Domestic fires were not yet lighted, and the high chimneys had the sky to themselves. Puffing out their poisonous volumes, they would not be long in hiding it; but, for half an hour, some of the many windows were golden, which showed the Coketown people a sun eternally in eclipse, through a medium of smoked glass.

So strange to turn from the chimneys to the birds. So strange to have the road-dust on his feet instead of the coal-grit. So strange to have lived to his time of life, and yet to be beginning like a boy this summer morning! With these musings in his mind, and his bundle under his arm, Stephen took his attentive face along the high road. And the trees arched over him, whispering that he left a true and loving heart behind.

CHAPTER VII.

GUNPOWDER.

Mr. James Harthouse, "going in" for his adopted party, soon began to score. With the aid of a little more coaching for the political sages, a little more genteel listlessness for the general society, and a tolerable management of the assumed honesty in dishonesty, most effective and most patronised of the polite deadly sins, he speedily came to be considered of much promise. The not being troubled with earnestness was a grand point in his favour, enabling him to take to the hard Fact fellows with as good a grace as if he had been born one of the tribe, and to throw all other tribes overboard, as conscious hypocrites.

"Whom none of us believe, my dear Mrs. Bounderby, and who do not believe themselves. The only difference between us and the professors of virtue or benevolence, or philanthropy—never mind the name—is, that we know it is all meaningless, and say so; while they know it equally and will never say so."

Why should she be shocked or warned by this reiteration? It was not so unlike her father's principles, and her early training, that it need startle her. Where was the great difference between the two schools, when each chained her down to material realities, and inspired her with no faith in anything else? What was there in her soul for James Harthouse to destroy, which Thomas Gradgrind had nurtured there in its state of innocence!

It was even the worse for her at this pass, that in her mind—implanted there before her eminently practical father began to form it—a struggling disposition to believe in a wider and nobler humanity than she had ever heard of constantly strove with doubts and resentments. With doubts, because the aspiration had been so laid waste in her youth. With resentments, because of the wrong that had been done her, if it were indeed a whisper of the truth. Upon a nature long accustomed to self-suppression, thus torn and divided, the Harthouse philosophy came as a relief and justification. Everything being hollow and worthless, she had

missed nothing and sacrificed nothing. What did it matter, she had said to her father, when he proposed her husband. What did it matter, she said still. With a scornful self-reliance, she asked herself, What did anything matter —and went on.

Towards what? Step by step, onward and downward, towards some end, yet so gradually, that she believed herself to remain motionless. As to Mr. Harthouse, whither *he* tended, he neither considered nor cared. He had no particular design or plan before him: no energetic wickedness ruffled his lassitude. He was as much amused and interested, at present, as it became so fine a gentleman to be; perhaps even more than it would have been consistent with his reputation to confess. Soon after his arrival he languidly wrote to his brother, the honourable and jocular member, that the Bounderbys were "great fun;" and further, that the female Bounderby, instead of being the Gorgon he had expected, was young, and remarkably pretty. After that, he wrote no more about them, and devoted his leisure chiefly to their house. He was very often in their house, in his flittings and visitings about the Coketown district; and was much encouraged by Mr. Bounderby. It was quite in Mr. Bounderby's gusty way to boast to all his world that *he* didn't care about your highly connected people, but that if his wife Tom Gradgrind's daughter did, she was welcome to their company.

Mr. James Harthouse began to think it would be a new sensation, if the face which changed so beautifully for the whelp, would change for him.

He was quick enough to observe; he had a good memory, and did not forget a word of the brother's revelations. He interwove them with everything he saw of the sister, and he began to understand her. To be sure, the better and profounder part of her character was not within his scope of perception; for in natures, as in seas, depth answers unto depth; but he soon began to read the rest with a student's eye.

Mr. Bounderby had taken possession of a house and grounds, about fifteen miles from the town, and accessible within a mile or two, by a railway striding on many arches over a wild country, undermined by deserted coal-shafts, and spotted at night by fires and black shapes of stationary engines at pits' mouths. This country, gradually softening

towards the neighbourhood of Mr. Bounderby's retreat, there mellowed into a rustic landscape, golden with heath, and snowy with hawthorn in the spring of the year, and tremulous with leaves and their shadows all the summer time. The bank had foreclosed a mortgage effected on the property thus pleasantly situated, by one of the Coketown magnates, who, in his determination to make a shorter cut than usual to an enormous fortune, overspeculated himself by about two hundred thousand pounds. These accidents did sometimes happen in the best regulated families of Coketown, but the bankrupts had no connection whatever with the improvident classes.

It afforded Mr. Bounderby supreme satisfaction to install himself in this snug little estate, and with demonstrative humility to grow cabbages in the flower-garden. He delighted to live, barrack-fashion, among the elegant furniture, and he bullied the very pictures with his origin. "Why, sir," he would say to a visitor, "I am told that Nickits," the late owner, "gave seven hundred pound for that Seabeach. Now, to be plain with you, if I ever, in the whole course of my life, take seven looks at it, at a hundred pound a look, it will be as much as I shall do. No, by George! I don't forget that I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. For years upon years, the only pictures in my possession, or that I could have got into my possession, by any means, unless I stole 'em, were the engravings of a man shaving himself in a boot, on the blacking bottles that I was overjoyed to use in cleaning boots with, and that I sold when they were empty for a farthing apiece, and glad to get it!"

Then he would address Mr. Harthouse in the same style. "Harthouse, you have a couple of horses down here. Bring half a dozen more if you like, and we'll find room for 'em. There's stabling in this place for a dozen horses; and unless Nickits is belied, he kept the full number. A round dozen of 'em, sir. When that man was a boy, he went to Westminster School. Went to Westminster School as a King's Scholar, when I was principally living on garbage, and sleeping in market baskets. Why, if I wanted to keep a dozen horses—which I don't, for one's enough for me—I couldn't bear to see 'em in their stalls here, and think what my own lodging used to be. I couldn't look at 'em, sir, and not order 'em out. Yet so things come

round. You see this place; you know what sort of a place it is; you are aware that there's not a completer place of its size in this kingdom or elsewhere—I don't care where —and here, got into the middle of it, like a maggot into a nut, is Josiah Bounderby. While Nickits (as a man came into my office, and told me yesterday), Nickits, who used to act in Latin, in the Westminster School plays, with the chief-justices and nobility of this country applauding him till they were black in the face, is drivelling at this minute —drivelling, sir!—in a fifth floor, up a narrow dark back street in Antwerp."

It was among the leafy shadows of this retirement, in the long sultry summer days, that Mr. Harthouse began to prove the face which had set him wondering when he first saw it, and to try if it would change for him.

"Mrs. Bounderby, I esteem it a most fortunate accident that I find you alone here. I have for some time had a particular wish to speak to you."

It was not by any wonderful accident that he found her, the time of day being that at which she was always alone, and the place being her favourite resort. It was an opening in a dark wood, where some felled trees lay, and where she would sit watching the fallen leaves of last year, as she had watched the falling ashes at home.

He sat down beside her, with a glance at her face.

"Your brother. My young friend Tom—"

Her colour brightened, and she turned to him with a look of interest. "I never in my life," he thought, "saw anything so remarkable and so captivating as the lighting of those features!" His face betrayed his thoughts—perhaps without betraying him, for it might have been according to its instructions so to do.

"Pardon me. The expression of your sisterly interest is so beautiful—Tom should be so proud of it—I know this is inexcusable, but I am so compelled to admire."

"Being so impulsive," she said composedly.

"Mrs. Bounderby, no: you know I make no pretence with you. You know I am a sordid piece of human nature, ready to sell myself at any time for any reasonable sum, and altogether incapable of any Arcadian proceeding whatever."

"I am waiting," she returned, "for your further reference to my brother.

"You are rigid with me, and I deserve it. I am as worthless a dog as you will find, except that I am not false —not false. But you surprised and started me from my subject, which was your brother. I have an interest in him."

"Have you an interest in anything, Mr. Harthouse?" she asked, half incredulously and half gratefully.

"If you had asked me when I first came here, I should have said no. I must say now—even at the hazard of appearing to make a pretence, and of justly awakening your incredulity—yes."

She made a slight movement, as if she were trying to speak, but could not find voice; at length she said, "Mr. Harthouse, I give you credit for being interested in my brother."

"Thank you. I claim to deserve it. You know how little I do claim, but I will go that length. You have done so much for him, you are so fond of him; your whole life, Mrs. Bounderby, expresses such charming self-forgetfulness on his account—pardon me again—I am running wide of the subject. I am interested in him for his own sake."

She had made the slightest action possible, as if she would have risen in a hurry and gone away. He had turned the course of what he said at that instant, and she remained.

"Mrs. Bounderby," he resumed, in a lighter manner, and yet with a show of effort in assuming it, which was even more expressive than the manner he dismissed; "it is no irrevocable offence in a young fellow of your brother's years, if he is heedless, inconsiderate, and expensive—a little dissipated, in the common phrase. Is he?"

"Yes."

"Allow me to be frank. Do you think he games at all?"

"I think he makes bets." Mr. Harthouse waiting, as if that were not her whole answer, she added, "I know he does."

"Of course he loses?"

"Yes."

"Everybody does lose who bets. May I hint at the probability of your sometimes supplying him with money for these purposes?"

She sat, looking down; but, at this question, raised her eyes searchingly and a little resentfully.

"Acquit me of impertinent curiosity, my dear Mrs.

Bounderby. I think Tom may be gradually falling into trouble, and I wish to stretch out a helping hand to him from the depths of my wicked experience.—Shall I say again, for his sake? Is that necessary?"

She seemed to try to answer, but nothing came of it.

"Candidly to confess everything that has occurred to me," said James Harthouse, again gliding with the same appearance of effort into his more airy manner; "I will confide to you my doubt whether he has had many advantages. Whether—forgive my plainness—whether any great amount of confidence is likely to have been established between himself and his most worthy father."

"I do not," said Louisa, flushing with her own great remembrance in that wise, "think it likely."

"Or, between himself, and—I may trust to your perfect understanding of my meaning, I am sure—and his highly esteemed brother-in-law."

She flushed deeper and deeper, and was burning red when she replied in a fainter voice, "I do not think that likely, either."

"Mrs. Bounderby," said Harthouse, after a short silence, "may there be a better confidence between yourself and me? Tom has borrowed a considerable sum of you?"

"You will understand, Mr. Harthouse," she returned, after some indecision: she had been more or less uncertain, and troubled throughout the conversation, and yet had in the main preserved her self-contained manner; "you will understand that if I tell you what you press to know, it is not by way of complaint or regret. I would never complain of anything, and what I have done I do not in the least regret."

"So spirited, too!" thought James Harthouse.

"When I married, I found that my brother was even at that time heavily in debt. Heavily for him, I mean. Heavily enough to oblige me to sell some trinkets. They were no sacrifice. I sold them very willingly. I attached no value to them. They were quite worthless to me."

Either she saw in his face that he knew, or she only feared in her conscience that he knew, that she spoke of some of her husband's gifts. She stopped, and reddened again. If he had not known it before, he would have known it then, though he had been a much duller man than he was.

"Since then, I have given my brother, at various times, what money I could spare: in short, what money I have had. Confiding in you at all, on the faith of the interest you profess for him, I will not do so by halves. Since you have been in the habit of visiting here, he has wanted in one sum as much as a hundred pounds. I have not been able to give it to him. I have felt uneasy for the consequences of his being so involved, but I have kept these secrets until now, when I trust them to your honour. I have held no confidence with any one, because—you anticipated my reason just now." She abruptly broke off.

He was a ready man, and he saw, and seized, an opportunity here of presenting her own image to her, slightly disguised as her brother.

"Mrs. Bounderby, though a graceless person, of the world worldly, I feel the utmost interest, I assure you, in what you tell me. I cannot possibly be hard upon your brother. I understand and share the wise consideration with which you regard his errors. With all possible respect both for Mr. Gradgrind and for Mr. Bounderby, I think I perceive that he has not been fortunate in his training. Bred at a disadvantage towards the society in which he has his part to play, he rushes into these extremes for himself, from opposite extremes that have long been forced —with the very best intentions we have no doubt—upon him. Mr. Bounderby's fine bluff English independence, though a most charming characteristic, does not—as we have agreed—invite confidence. If I might venture to remark that it is the least in the world deficient in that delicacy to which a youth mistaken, a character misconceived, and abilities misdirected, would turn for relief and guidance, I should express what it presents to my own view."

As she sat looking straight before her, across the changing lights upon the grass into the darkness of the wood beyond, he saw in her face her application of his very distinctly uttered words.

"All allowance," he continued, "must be made. I have one great fault to find with Tom, however, which I cannot forgive, and for which I take him heavily to account."

Louisa turned her eyes to his face, and asked him what fault was that?"

"Perhaps," he returned, "I have said enough. Perhaps

it would have been better, on the whole, if no allusion to it had escaped me."

"You alarm me, Mr. Harthouse. Pray let me know it."

"To relieve you from needless apprehension—and as this confidence regarding your brother, which I prize I am sure above all possible things, has been established between us—I obey. I cannot forgive him for not being more sensible in every word, look, and act of his life, of the affection of his best friend; of the devotion of his best friend; of her unselfishness; of her sacrifice. The return he makes her, within my observation, is a very poor one. What she has done for him demands his constant love and gratitude, not his ill-humour and caprice. Careless fellow as I am, I am not so indifferent, Mrs. Bounderby, as to be regardless of this vice in your brother, or inclined to consider it a venial offence."

The wood floated before her, for her eyes were suffused with tears. They rose from a deep well, long concealed, and her heart was filled with acute pain that found no relief in them.

"In a word, it is to correct your brother in this, Mrs. Bounderby, that I must aspire. My better knowledge of his circumstances, and my direction and advice in extricating them—rather valuable, I hope, as coming from a scapegrace on a much larger scale—will give me some influence over him, and all I gain I shall certainly use towards this end. I have said enough, and more than enough. I seem to be protesting that I am a sort of good fellow, when, upon my honour, I have not the least intention to make any protestation to that effect, and openly announce that I am nothing of the sort. Yonder, among the trees," he added, having lifted up his eyes and looked about; for he had watched her closely until now; "is your brother himself; no doubt, just come down. As he seems to be loitering in this direction, it may be as well, perhaps, to walk towards him, and throw ourselves in his way. He has been very silent and doleful of late. Perhaps, his brotherly conscience is touched—if there are such things as consciences. Though, upon my honour, I hear of them much too often to believe in them."

He assisted her to rise, and she took his arm, and they advanced to meet the whelp. He was idly beating the

branches as he lounged along: or he stooped viciously to rip the moss from the trees with his stick. He was startled when they came upon him while he was engaged in this latter pastime, and his colour changed.

"Halloa!" he stammered; "I didn't know you were here."

"Whose name, Tom," said Mr. Harthouse, putting his hand upon his shoulder and turning him, so that they all three walked towards the house together, "have you been carving on the trees?"

"Whose name?" returned Tom. "Oh! You mean what girl's name?"

"You have a suspicious appearance of inscribing some fair creature's on the bark, Tom."

"Not much of that, Mr. Harthouse, unless some fair creature with a slashing fortune at her own disposal would take a fancy to me. Or she might be as ugly as she was rich, without any fear of losing me. I'd carve her name as often as she liked."

"I am afraid you are mercenary, Tom."

"Mercenary," repeated Tom. "Who is not mercenary? Ask my sister."

"Have you so proved it to be a failing of mine, Tom?" said Louisa, showing no other sense of his discontent and ill-nature.

"You know whether the cap fits you, Loo," returned her brother sulkily. "If it does, you can wear it."

"Tom is misanthropical to-day, as all bored people are now and then," said Mr. Harthouse. "Don't believe him, Mrs. Bounderby. He knows much better. I shall disclose some of his opinions of you, privately expressed to me, unless he relents a little."

"At all events, Mr. Harthouse," said Tom, softening in his admiration of his patron, but shaking his head sullenly too, "you can't tell her that I ever praised her for being mercenary. I may have praised her for being the contrary, and I should do it again, if I had as good reason. However, never mind this now; it's not very interesting to you, and I am sick of the subject."

They walked on to the house, where Louisa quitted her visitor's arm and went in. He stood looking after her, as she ascended the steps, and passed into the shadow of the door; then put his hand upon her brother's shoulder again,

and invited him with a confidential nod to a walk in the garden.

"Tom, my fine fellow, I want to have a word with you."

They had stopped among a disorder of roses—it was part of Mr. Bounderby's humility to keep Nickits's roses on a reduced scale—and Tom sat down on a terrace-parapet, plucking buds and picking them to pieces; while his powerful Familiar stood over him, with a foot upon the parapet, and his figure easily resting on the arm supported by that knee. They were just visible from her window. Perhaps she saw them.

"Tom, what's the matter?"

"Oh! Mr. Harthouse," said Tom with a groan, "I am hard up, and bothered out of my life."

"My good fellow, so am I."

"You!" returned Tom. "You are the picture of independence. Mr. Harthouse, I am in a horrible mess. You have no idea what a state I have got myself into—what a state my sister might have got me out of, if she would only have done it."

He took to biting the rose-buds now, and tearing them away from his teeth with a hand that trembled like an infirm old man's. After one exceedingly observant look at him, his companion relapsed into his lightest air.

"Tom, you are inconsiderate: you expect too much of your sister. You have had money of her, you dog, you know you have."

"Well, Mr. Harthouse, I know I have. How else was I to get it? Here's old Bounderby always boasting that at my age he lived upon twopence a month, or something of that sort. Here's my father drawing what he calls a line, and tying me down to it from a baby, neck and heels. Here's my mother who never has anything of her own, except her complaints. What *is* a fellow to do for money, and where *am* I to look for it, if not to my sister?"

He was almost crying, and scattered the buds about by dozens. Mr. Harthouse took him persuasively by the coat.

"But, my dear Tom, if your sister has not got it—"

"Not got it, Mr. Harthouse? I don't say she has got it. I may have wanted more than she was likely to have got. But then she ought to get it. She could get it. It's of no use pretending to make a secret of matters now, after

what I have told you already; you know she didn't marry old Bounderby for her own sake, or for his sake, but for my sake. Then why doesn't she get what I want, out of him, for my sake? She is not obliged to say what she is going to do with it; she is sharp enough; she could manage to coax it out of him, if she chose. Then why doesn't she choose, when I tell her of what consequence it is? But no. There she sits in his company like a stone, instead of making herself agreeable and getting it easily. I don't know what you may call this, but *I* call it unnatural conduct."

There was a piece of ornamental water immediately below the parapet, on the other side, into which Mr. James Harthouse had a very strong inclination to pitch Mr. Thomas Gradgrind Junior, as the injured men of Coketown threatened to pitch their property into the Atlantic. But he preserved his easy attitude; and nothing more solid went over the stone balustrades than the accumulated rosebuds now floating about, a little surface-island.

"My dear Tom," said Harthouse, "let me try to be your banker."

"For God's sake," replied Tom, suddenly, "don't talk about bankers!" And very white he looked, in contrast with the roses. Very white.

Mr. Harthouse, as a thoroughly well-bred man, accustomed to the best society, was not to be surprised—he could as soon have been affected—but he raised his eyelids a little more, as if they were lifted by a feeble touch of wonder. Albeit it was as much against the precepts of his school to wonder, as it was against the doctrines of the Gradgrind College.

"What is the present need, Tom? Three figures? Out with them. Say what they are."

"Mr. Harthouse," returned Tom, now actually crying; and his tears were better than his injuries, however pitiful a figure he made; "it's too late; the money is of no use to me at present. I should have had it before to be of use to me. But I am very much obliged to you; you're a true friend."

A true friend! "Whelp, whelp!" thought Mr. Harthouse, lazily; "what an Ass you are!"

"And I take your offer as a great kindness," said Tom, grasping his hand. "As a great kindness, Mr. Harthouse."

"Well," returned the other, "it may be of more use by-and-bye. And my good fellow, if you will open your bedevilments to me when they come thick upon you, I may show you better ways out of them than you can find for yourself."

"Thank you," said Tom, shaking his head dismally, and chewing rose-buds. "I wish I had known you sooner, Mr. Harthouse."

"Now, you see, Tom," said Mr. Harthouse in conclusion, himself tossing over a rose or two, as a contribution to the island, which was always drifting to the wall as if it wanted to become a part of the mainland: "every man is selfish in everything he does, and I am exactly like the rest of my fellow-creatures. I am desperately intent;" the languor of his desperation being quite tropical; "on your softening towards your sister—which you ought to do; and on your being a more loving and agreeable sort of brother—which you ought to be."

"I will be, Mr. Harthouse."

"No time like the present, Tom. Begin at once."

"Certainly I will. And my sister Loo shall say so."

"Having made which bargain, Tom," said Harthouse, clapping him on the shoulder again, with an air which left him at liberty to infer—as he did, poor fool—that this condition was imposed upon him in mere careless good-nature to lessen his sense of obligation, "we will tear ourselves asunder until dinner-time."

When Tom appeared before dinner, though his mind seemed heavy enough, his body was on the alert; and he appeared before Mr. Bounderby came in. "I didn't mean to be cross, Loo," he said, giving her his hand, and kissing her. "I know you are fond of me, and you know I am fond of you."

After this, there was a smile upon Louisa's face that day, for some one else. Alas, for some one else!

"So much the less is the whelp the only creature that she cares for," thought James Harthouse, reversing the reflection of his first day's knowledge of her pretty face. "So much the less, so much the less."

CHAPTER VIII.

EXPLOSION.

The next morning was too bright a morning for sleep, and James Harthouse rose early, and sat in the pleasant bay window of his dressing-room, smoking the rare tobacco that had had so wholesome an influence on his young friend. Reposing in the sunlight, with the fragrance of his eastern pipe about him, and the dreamy smoke vanishing into the air, so rich and soft with summer odours, he reckoned up his advantages as an idle winner might count his gains. He was not at all bored for the time, and could give his mind to it.

He had established a confidence with her, from which her husband was excluded. He had established a confidence with her, that absolutely turned upon her indifference towards her husband, and the absence, now and at all times, of any congeniality between them. He had artfully, but plainly assured her, that he knew her heart in its last most delicate recesses; he had come so near to her through its tenderest sentiment; he had associated himself with that feeling; and the barrier behind which she lived, had melted away. All very odd, and very satisfactory!

And yet he had not, even now, any earnest wickedness of purpose in him. Publicly and privately, it were much better for the age in which he lived, that he and the legion of whom he was one were designedly bad, than indifferent and purposeless. It is the drifting icebergs setting with any current anywhere, that wreck the ships.

When the Devil goeth about like a roaring lion, he goeth about in a shape by which few but savages and hunters are attracted. But, when he is trimmed, smoothed, and varnished, according to the mode: when he is aweary of vice, and aweary of virtue, used up as to brimstone, and used up as to bliss; then, whether he take to the serving out of red tape, or to the kindling of red fire, he is the very Devil.

So, James Harthouse reclined in the window, indolently smoking, and reckoning up the steps he had taken on the

road by which he happened to be travelling. The end to which it led was before him, pretty plainly; but he troubled himself with no calculations about it. What will be, will be.

As he had rather a long ride to take that day—for there was a public occasion "to do" at some distance, which afforded a tolerable opportunity of going in for the Gradgrind men—he dressed early, and went down to breakfast. He was anxious to see if she had relapsed since the previous evening. No. He resumed where he had left off. There was a look of interest for him again.

He got through the day as much (or as little) to his own satisfaction, as was to be expected under the fatiguing circumstances; and came riding back at six o'clock. There was a sweep of some half mile between the lodge and the house, and he was riding along at a foot pace over the smooth gravel, once Nickits's, when Mr. Bounderby burst out of the shrubbery, with such violence as to make his horse shy across the road.

"Harthouse!" cried Mr. Bounderby. "Have you heard?"

"Heard what?" said Harthouse, soothing his horse, and inwardly favouring Mr. Bounderby with no good wishes.

"Then you *haven't* heard!"

"I have heard you, and so has this brute. I have heard nothing else."

Mr. Bounderby, red and hot, planted himself in the centre of the path before the horse's head, to explode his bombshell with more effect.

"The Bank's robbed!"

"You don't mean it!"

"Robbed last night, sir. Robbed in an extraordinary manner. Robbed with a false key."

"Of much?"

Mr. Bounderby, in his desire to make the most of it, really seemed mortified by being obliged to reply, "Why, no; not of very much. But it might have been."

"Of how much?"

"Oh! as a sum—if you stick to a sum—of not more than a hundred and fifty pound," said Bounderby, with impatience. "But it's not the sum; it's the fact. It's the fact of the Bank being robbed, that's the important circumstance. I am surprised you don't see it."

"My dear Bounderby," said James, dismounting, and giving his bridle to his servant, "I *do* see it; and am as overcome as you can possibly desire me to be, by the spectacle afforded to my mental view. Nevertheless, I may be allowed, I hope, to congratulate you—which I do with all my soul, I assure you—on your not having sustained a greater loss."

"Thank'ee," replied Bounderby, in a short, ungracious manner. "But I tell you what. It might have been twenty thousand pound."

"I suppose it might."

"Suppose it might! By the Lord, you *may* suppose so. By George!" said Mr. Bounderby, with sundry menacing nods and shakes of his head. "It might have been twice twenty. There's no knowing what it would have been, or wouldn't have been, as it was, but for the fellows' being disturbed."

Louisa had come up now, and Mrs. Sparsit, and Bitzer.

"Here's Tom Gradgrind's daughter knows pretty well what it might have been, if you don't," blustered Bounderby. "Dropped, sir, as if she was shot when I told her! Never knew her do such a thing before. Does her credit, under the circumstances, in my opinion!"

She still looked faint and pale. James Harthouse begged her to take his arm; and as they moved on very slowly, asked her how the robbery had been committed.

"Why, I am going to tell you," said Bounderby, irritably giving his arm to Mrs. Sparsit. "If you hadn't been so mighty particular about the sum, I should have begun to tell you before. You know this lady (for she *is* a lady), Mrs. Sparsit?"

"I have already had the honour—"

"Very well. And this young man, Bitzer, you saw him too on the same occasion?" Mr. Harthouse inclined his head in assent, and Bitzer knuckled his forehead.

"Very well. They live at the Bank. You know they live at the Bank, perhaps? Very well. Yesterday afternoon, at the close of business hours, everything was put away as usual. In the iron room that this young fellow sleeps outside of, there was never mind how much. In the little safe in young Tom's closet, the safe used for petty purposes, there was a hundred and fifty odd pound."

"A hundred and fifty-four, seven, one," said Bitzer.

"Come!" retorted Bounderby, stopping to wheel round upon him, "let's have none of *your* interruptions. It's enough to be robbed while you're snoring because you're too comfortable, without being put right with *your* four seven ones. I didn't snore, myself, when I was your age, let me tell you. I hadn't victuals enough to snore. And I didn't four seven one. Not if I knew it."

Bitzer knuckled his forehead again, in a sneaking manner, and seemed at once particularly impressed and depressed by the instance last given of Mr. Bounderby's moral abstinence.

"A hundred and fifty odd pound," resumed Mr. Bounderby. "That sum of money, young Tom locked in his safe, not a very strong safe, but that's no matter now. Everything was left, all right. Some time in the night, while this young fellow snored—Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, you say you have heard him snore?"

"Sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "I cannot say that I have heard him precisely snore, and therefore must not make that statement. But on winter evenings, when he has fallen asleep at his table, I have heard him, what I should prefer to describe as partially choke. I have heard him on such occasions produce sounds of a nature similar to what may be sometimes heard in Dutch clocks. Not," said Mrs. Sparsit, with a lofty sense of giving strict evidence, "that I would convey any imputation on his moral character. Far from it. I have always considered Bitzer a young man of the most upright principle; and to that I beg to bear my testimony."

"Well!" said the exasperated Bounderby, "while he was snoring, *or* choking, *or* Dutch-clocking, *or* something or other—being asleep—some fellows, somehow, whether previously concealed in the house or not remains to be seen, got to young Tom's safe, forced it, and abstracted the contents. Being then disturbed, they made off; letting themselves out at the main door, and double-locking it again (it was double-locked, and the key under Mrs. Sparsit's pillow) with a false key, which was picked up in the street near the Bank, about twelve o'clock to-day. No alarm takes place, till this chap, Bitzer, turns out this morning, and begins to open and prepare the offices for business. Then, looking at Tom's safe, he sees the door ajar, and finds the lock forced, and the money gone."

"Where is Tom, by-the-bye?" asked Harthouse, glancing round.

"He has been helping the police," said Bounderby, "and stays behind at the Bank. I wish these fellows had tried to rob me when I was at his time of life. They would have been out of pocket if they had invested eighteen-pence in the job; I can tell 'em that."

"Is anybody suspected?"

"Suspected? I should think there was somebody suspected. Egod!" said Bounderby, relinquishing Mrs. Sparsit's arm to wipe his heated head. "Josiah Bounderby of Coketown is not to be plundered and nobody suspected. No, thank you!"

Might Mr. Harthouse inquire Who was suspected?

"Well," said Bounderby, stopping and facing about to confront them all, "I'll tell you. It's not to be mentioned everywhere; it's not to be mentioned anywhere: in order that the scoundrels concerned (there's a gang of 'em) may be thrown off their guard. So take this in confidence. Now wait a bit." Mr. Bounderby wiped his head again. "What should you say to;" here he violently exploded: "to a Hand being in it?"

"I hope," said Harthouse, lazily, "not our friend Blackpot?"

"Say Pool instead of Pot, sir," returned Bounderby, "and that's the man."

Louisa faintly uttered some word of incredulity and surprise.

"O yes! I know!" said Bounderby, immediately catching at the sound. "I know! I am used to that. I know all about it. They are the finest people in the world, these fellows are. They have got the gift of the gab, they have. They only want to have their rights explained to them, they do. But I tell you what. Show me a dissatisfied Hand, and I'll show you a man that's fit for anything bad, I don't care what it is."

Another of the popular fictions of Coketown, which some pains had been taken to disseminate—and which some people really believed.

"But I am acquainted with these chaps," said Bounderby. "I can read 'em off, like books. Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, I appeal to you. What warning did I give that fellow, the first time he set foot in the house, when the ex-

press object of his visit was to know how he could knock Religion over, and floor the Established Church? Mrs. Sparsit, in point of high connections, you are on a level with the aristocracy,—did I say, or did I not say, to that fellow, 'you can't hide the truth from me: you are not the kind of fellow I like; you'll come to no good'?"

"Assuredly, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "you did, in a highly impressive manner, give him such an admonition."

"When he shocked you, ma'am," said Bounderby; "when he shocked your feelings?"

"Yes, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, with a meek shake of her head, "he certainly did so. Though I do not mean to say but that my feelings may be weaker on such points—more foolish if the term is preferred—than they might have been, if I had always occupied my present position."

Mr. Bounderby stared with a bursting pride at Mr. Harthouse, as much as to say, "I am the proprietor of this female, and she's worth your attention, I think." Then, resumed his discourse.

"You can recall for yourself, Harthouse, what I said to him when you saw him. I didn't mince the matter with him. I am never mealy with 'em. I KNOW 'em. Very well, sir. Three days after that, he bolted. Went off, nobody knows where: as my mother did in my infancy—only with this difference, that he is a worse subject than my mother, if possible. What did he do before he went? What do you say;" Mr. Bounderby, with his hat in his hand, gave a beat upon the crown at every little division of his sentences, as if it were a tambourine; "to his being seen—night after night—watching the Bank?—to his lurking about there—after dark?—To its striking Mrs. Sparsit—that he could be lurking for no good—To her calling Bitzer's attention to him, and their both taking notice of him—And to its appearing on inquiry to-day—that he was also noticed by the neighbours?" Having come to the climax, Mr. Bounderby, like an oriental dancer, put his tambourine on his head.

"Suspicious," said James Harthouse, "certainly."

"I think so, sir," said Bounderby, with a defiant nod. "I think so. But there are more of 'em in it. There's an old woman. One never hears of these things till the mischief's done; all sorts of defects are found out in the stable door after the horse is stolen; there's an old woman turns

up now. An old woman who seems to have been flying into town on a broomstick, every now and then. *She* watches the place a whole day before this fellow begins, and on the night when you saw him, she steals away with him, and holds a council with him—I suppose, to make her report on going off duty, and be damned to her."

There was such a person in the room that night, and she shrunk from observation, thought Louisa.

"This is not all of 'em, even as we already know 'em," said Bounderby, with many nods of hidden meaning. "But I have said enough for the present. You'll have the goodness to keep it quiet, and mention it to no one. It may take time, but we shall have 'em. It's policy to give 'em line enough, and there's no objection to that."

"Of course, they will be punished with the utmost rigour of the law, as notice-boards observe," replied James Harthouse, "and serve them right. Fellows who go in for Banks must take the consequences. If there were no consequences, we should all go in for Banks." He had gently taken Louisa's parasol from her hand, and had put it up for her; and she walked under its shade, though the sun did not shine there.

"For the present, Loo Bounderby," said her husband, "here's Mrs. Sparsit to look after. Mrs. Sparsit's nerves have been acted upon by this business, and she'll stay here a day or two. So, make her comfortable."

"Thank you very much, sir," that discreet lady observed, "but pray do not let My comfort be a consideration. Anything will do for Me."

It soon appeared that if Mrs. Sparsit had a failing in her association with that domestic establishment, it was that she was so excessively regardless of herself and regardful of others, as to be a nuisance. On being shown her chamber, she was so dreadfully sensible of its comforts as to suggest the inference that she would have preferred to pass the night on the mangle in the laundry. True, the Powlers and the Scadgerses were accustomed to splendour, "but it is my duty to remember," Mrs. Sparsit was fond of observing with a lofty grace: particularly when any of the domestics were present, "that what I was, I am no longer. Indeed," said she, "if I could altogether cancel the remembrance that Mr. Sparsit was a Powler, or that I myself am related to the Scadgers family; or if I could even revoke

the fact, and make myself a person of common descent and ordinary connections; I would gladly do so. I should think it, under existing circumstances, right to do so." The same Hermitical state of mind led to her renunciation of made dishes and wines at dinner, until fairly commanded by Mr. Bounderby to take them; when she said, "Indeed you are very good, sir;" and departed from a resolution of which she had made rather formal and public announcement, to "wait for the simple mutton." She was likewise deeply apologetic for wanting the salt; and, feeling amiably bound to bear out Mr. Bounderby to the fullest extent in the testimony he had borne to her nerves, occasionally sat back in her chair and silently wept; at which periods a tear of large dimensions, like a crystal ear-ring, might be observed (or rather, must be, for it insisted on public notice) sliding down her Roman nose.

But Mrs. Sparsit's greatest point, first and last, was her determination to pity Mr. Bounderby. There were occasions when in looking at him she was involuntarily moved to shake her head, as who would say, "Alas poor Yorick!" After allowing herself to be betrayed into these evidences of emotion, she would force a lambent brightness, and would be fitfully cheerful, and would say, "You have still good spirits, sir, I am thankful to find;" and would appear to hail it as a blessed dispensation that Mr. Bounderby bore up as he did. One idiosyncrasy for which she often apologised, she found it excessively difficult to conquer. She had a curious propensity to call Mrs. Bounderby "Miss Gradgrind," and yielded to it some three or four score times in the course of the evening. Her repetition of this mistake covered Mrs. Sparsit with modest confusion; but indeed, she said, it seemed so natural to say Miss Gradgrind: whereas, to persuade herself that the young lady whom she had had the happiness of knowing from a child could be really and truly Mrs. Bounderby, she found almost impossible. It was a further singularity of this remarkable case, that the more she thought about it, the more impossible it appeared; "the differences," she observed, "being such."

In the drawing-room after dinner, Mr. Bounderby tried the case of the robbery, examined the witnesses, made notes of the evidence, found the suspected persons guilty, and sentenced them to the extreme punishment of the law.

That done, Bitzer was dismissed to town with instructions to recommend Tom to come home by the mail-train.

When candles were brought, Mrs. Sparsit murmured, "Don't be low, sir. Pray let me see you cheerful, sir, as I used to do." Mr. Bounderby, upon whom these consolations had begun to produce the effect of making him, in a bull-headed blundering way, sentimental, sighed like some large sea-animal. "I cannot bear to see you so, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit. "Try a hand at backgammon, sir, as you used to do when I had the honour of living under your roof." "I haven't played backgammon, ma'am," said Mr. Bounderby, "since that time." "No, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, soothingly, "I am aware that you have not. I remember that Miss Gradgrind takes no interest in the game. But I shall be happy, sir, if you will condescend."

They played near a window, opening on the garden. It was a fine night: not moonlight, but sultry and fragrant. Louisa and Mr. Harthouse strolled out into the garden, where their voices could be heard in the stillness, though not what they said. Mrs. Sparsit, from her place at the backgammon board, was constantly straining her eyes to pierce the shadows without. "What's the matter, ma'am?" said Mr. Bounderby; "you don't see a Fire, do you?" "Oh dear no, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "I was thinking of the dew." "What have you got to do with the dew, ma'am?" said Mr. Bounderby. "It's not myself, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "I am fearful of Miss Gradgrind's taking cold." "She never takes cold," said Mr. Bounderby. "Really, sir?" said Mrs. Sparsit. And was affected with a cough in her throat.

When the time drew near for retiring, Mr. Bounderby took a glass of water. "Oh, sir?" said Mrs. Sparsit. "Not your sherry warm, with lemon-peel and nutmeg?" "Why I have got out of the habit of taking it now, ma'am," said Mr. Bounderby. "The more's the pity, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit; "you are losing all your good old habits. Cheer up, sir! If Miss Gradgrind will permit me, I will offer to make it for you, as I have often done."

Miss Gradgrind readily permitting Mrs. Sparsit to do anything she pleased, that considerate lady made the beverage, and handed it to Mr. Bounderby. "It will do you good, sir. It will warm your heart. It is the sort of thing you want, and ought to take, sir." And when Mr. Bound-

erby said, "Your health, ma'am!" she answered with great feeling. "Thank you, sir. The same to you, and happiness also." Finally, she wished him good night, with great pathos; and Mr. Bounderby went to bed, with a maudlin persuasion that he had been crossed in something tender, though he could not, for his life, have mentioned what it was.

Long after Louisa had undressed and lain down, she watched and waited for her brother's coming home. That could hardly be, she knew, until an hour past midnight; but in the country silence, which did anything but calm the trouble of her thoughts, time lagged wearily. At last, when the darkness and stillness had seemed for hours to thicken one another, she heard the bell at the gate. She felt as though she would have been glad that it rang on until daylight; but it ceased, and the circles of its last sound spread out fainter and wider in the air, and all was dead again.

She waited yet some quarter of an hour, as she judged. Then she arose, put on a loose robe, and went out of her room in the dark, and up the staircase to her brother's room. His door being shut, she softly opened it and spoke to him, approaching his bed with a noiseless step.

She kneeled down beside it, passed her arm over his neck, and drew his face to hers. She knew that he only feigned to be asleep, but she said nothing to him.

He started by-and-bye as if he were just then awakened, and asked who that was, and what was the matter?

"Tom, have you anything to tell me? If ever you loved me in your life, and have anything concealed from every one besides, tell it to me."

"I don't know what you mean, Loo. You have been dreaming."

"My dear brother:" she laid her head down on his pillow, and her hair flowed over him as if she would hide him from every one but herself: "is there nothing that you have to tell me? Is there nothing you can tell me if you will? You can tell me nothing that will change me. O Tom, tell me the truth!"

"I don't know what you mean, Loo!"

"As you lie here alone, my dear, in the melancholy night, so you must lie somewhere one night, when even I, if I am living then, shall have left you. As I am here be-

side you, barefoot, unclothed, undistinguishable in darkness, so must I lie through all the night of my decay, until I am dust. In the name of that time, Tom, tell me the truth now!"

"What is it you want to know?"

"You may be certain;" in the energy of her love she took him to her bosom as if he were a child; "that I will not reproach you. You may be certain that I will be compassionate and true to you. You may be certain that I will save you at whatever cost. O Tom, have you nothing to tell me? Whisper very softly. Say only 'yes,' and I shall understand you!"

She turned her ear to his lips, but he remained doggedly silent.

"Not a word, Tom?"

"How can I say Yes, or how can I say No, when I don't know what you mean? Loo, you are a brave, kind girl, worthy I begin to think of a better brother than I am. But I have nothing more to say. Go to bed, go to bed."

"You are tired," she whispered presently, more in her usual way.

"Yes, I am quite tired out."

"You have been so hurried and disturbed to-day. Have any fresh discoveries been made?"

"Only those you have heard of, from—him."

"Tom, have you said to any one that we made a visit to those people, and that we saw those three together?"

"No. Didn't you yourself particularly ask me to keep it quiet when you asked me to go there with you?"

"Yes. But I did not know then what was going to happen."

"Nor I neither. How could I?"

He was very quick upon her with this retort.

"Ought I to say, after what has happened," said his sister, standing by the bed—she had gradually withdrawn herself and risen, "that I made that visit? Should I say so? Must I say so?"

"Good Heavens, Loo," returned her brother, "you are not in the habit of asking my advice. Say what you like. If you keep it to yourself, I shall keep it to *my*self. If you disclose it, there's an end of it."

It was too dark for either to see the other's face; but each seemed very attentive, and to consider before speaking.

"Tom, do you believe the man I gave the money to, is really implicated in this crime?"

"I don't know. I don't see why he shouldn't be."

"He seemed to me an honest man."

"Another person may seem to you dishonest, and yet not be so."

There was a pause, for he had hesitated and stopped.

"In short," resumed Tom, as if he had made up his mind, "if you come to that, perhaps I was so far from being altogether in his favour, that I took him outside the door to tell him quietly, that I thought he might consider himself very well off to get such a windfall as he had got from my sister, and that I hoped he would make good use of it. You remember whether I took him out or not. I say nothing against the man; he may be a very good fellow, for anything I know; I hope he is."

"Was he offended by what you said?"

"No, he took it pretty well; he was civil enough. Where are you, Loo?" He sat up in bed and kissed her. "Good night, my dear, good night!"

"You have nothing more to tell me?"

"No. What should I have? You wouldn't have me tell you a lie!"

"I wouldn't have you do that to-night, Tom, of all the nights in your life; many and much happier as I hope they will be."

"Thank you, my dear Loo. I am so tired, that I am sure I wonder I don't say anything to get to sleep. Go to bed, go to bed."

Kissing her again, he turned round, drew the coverlet over his head, and lay as still as if that time had come by which she had adjured him. She stood for some time at the bedside before she slowly moved away. She stopped at the door, looked back when she had opened it, and asked him if he had called her? But he lay still, and she softly closed the door and returned to her room.

Then the wretched boy looked cautiously up and found her gone, crept out of bed, fastened his door, and threw himself upon his pillow again: tearing his hair, morosely crying, grudgingly loving her, hatefully but impenitently spurning himself, and no less hatefully and unprofitably spurning all the good in the world.

CHAPTER IX.

HEARING THE LAST OF IT.

Mrs. Sparsit, lying by to recover the tone of her nerves in Mr. Bounderby's retreat, kept such a sharp look-out, night and day, under her Coriolanian eyebrows, that her eyes, like a couple of lighthouses on an iron-bound coast, might have warned all prudent mariners from that bold rock her Roman nose and the dark and craggy region in its neighbourhood, but for the placidity of her manner. Although it was hard to believe that her retiring for the night could be anything but a form, so severely wide awake were those classical eyes of hers, and so impossible did it seem that her rigid nose could yield to any relaxing influence, yet her manner of sitting, smoothing her uncomfortable, not to say, gritty mittens (they were constructed of a cool fabric like a meat-safe), or of ambling to unknown places of destination with her foot in her cotton stirrup, was so perfectly serene, that most observers would have been constrained to suppose her a dove, embodied by some freak of nature, in the earthly tabernacle of a bird of the hooked-beaked order.

She was a most wonderful woman for prowling about the house. How she got from story to story was a mystery beyond solution. A lady so decorous in herself, and so highly connected, was not to be suspected of dropping over the banisters or sliding down them, yet her extraordinary facility of locomotion suggested the wild idea. Another noticeable circumstance in Mrs. Sparsit was that she was never hurried. She would shoot with consummate velocity from the roof to the hall, yet would be in full possession of her breath and dignity on the moment of her arrival there. Neither was she ever seen by human vision to go at a great pace.

She took very kindly to Mr. Harthouse, and had some pleasant conversation with him soon after her arrival. She made him her stately curtsey in the garden, one morning before breakfast.

"It appears but yesterday, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, "that

I had the honour of receiving you at the Bank, when you were so good as to wish to be made acquainted with Mr. Bounderby's address."

"An occasion, I am sure, not to be forgotten by myself in the course of Ages," said Mr. Harthouse, inclining his head to Mrs. Sparsit with the most indolent of all possible airs.

"We live in a singular world, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit.

"I have had the honour, by a coincidence of which I am proud, to have made a remark, similar in effect, though not so epigrammatically expressed."

"A singular world, I would say, sir," pursued Mrs. Sparsit; after acknowledging the compliment with a drooping of her dark eyebrows, not altogether so mild in its expression as her voice was in its dulcet tones; "as regards the intimacies we form at one time, with individuals we were quite ignorant of, at another. I recall, sir, that on that occasion you went so far as to say you were actually apprehensive of Miss Gradgrind."

"Your memory does me more honour than my insignificance deserves. I availed myself of your obliging hints to correct my timidity, and it is unnecessary to add that they were perfectly accurate. Mrs. Sparsit's talent for—in fact for anything requiring accuracy—with a combination of strength of mind—and Family—is too habitually developed to admit of any question." He was almost falling asleep over this compliment; it took him so long to get through, and his mind wandered so much in the course of its execution.

"You found Miss Gradgrind—I really cannot call her Mrs. Bounderby; it's very absurd of me—as youthful as I described her?" asked Mrs. Sparsit, sweetly.

"You drew her portrait perfectly," said Mr. Harthouse. "Presented her dead image."

"Very engaging, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, causing her mittens slowly to revolve over one another.

"Highly so."

"It used to be considered," said Mrs. Sparsit, "that Miss Gradgrind was wanting in animation, but I confess she appears to me considerably and strikingly improved in that respect. Ay, and indeed here *is* Mr. Bounderby!" cried Mrs. Sparsit, nodding her head a great many times, as if she had been talking and thinking of no one else. "How

do you find yourself this morning, sir? Pray let us see you cheerful, sir."

Now, these persistent assuagements of his misery, and lightenings of his load, had by this time begun to have the effect of making Mr. Bounderby softer than usual towards Mrs. Sparsit, and harder than usual to most other people from his wife downward. So, when Mrs. Sparsit said with forced lightness of heart, "You want your breakfast, sir, but I dare say Miss Gradgrind will soon be here to preside at the table," Mr. Bounderby replied, "If I waited to be taken care of by my wife, ma'am, I believe you know pretty well I should wait till Doomsday, so I'll trouble *you* to take charge of the teapot." Mrs. Sparsit complied, and assumed her old position at table.

This again made the excellent woman vastly sentimental. She was so humble withal, that when Louisa appeared, she rose, protesting she never could think of sitting in that place under existing circumstances, often as she had had the honour of making Mr. Bounderby's breakfast, before Mrs. Gradgrind—she begged pardon, she meant to say Miss Bounderby—she hoped to be excused, but she really could not get it right yet, though she trusted to become familiar with it by-and-bye—had assumed her present position. It was only (she observed) because Miss Gradgrind happened to be a little late, and Mr. Bounderby's time was so very precious, and she knew it of old to be so essential that he should breakfast to the moment, that she had taken the liberty of complying with his request; long as his will had been a law to her.

"There! Stop where you are, ma'am," said Mr. Bounderby, "stop where you are! Mrs. Bounderby will be very glad to be relieved of the trouble, I believe."

"Don't say that, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, almost with severity, "because that is very unkind to Mrs. Bounderby. And to be unkind is not to be you, sir."

"You may set your mind at rest, ma'am.—You can take it very quietly, can't you, Loo?" said Mr. Bounderby, in a blustering way to his wife.

"Of course. It is of no moment. Why should it be of any importance to me?"

"Why should it be of any importance to any one, Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am?" said Mr. Bounderby, swelling with a sense of slight. "You attach too much importance to

these things, ma'am. By George, you'll be corrupted in some of your notions here. You are old-fashioned, ma'am. You are behind Tom Gradgrind's children's time."

"What is the matter with you?" asked Louisa, coldly surprised. "What has given you offence?"

"Offence!" repeated Bounderby. "Do you suppose if there was any offence given me, I shouldn't name it, and request to have it corrected? I am a straightforward man, I believe. I don't go beating about for side-winds."

"I suppose no one ever had occasion to think you too diffident, or too delicate," Louisa answered him composedly: "I have never made that objection to you, either as a child or as a woman. I don't understand what you would have."

"Have?" returned Mr. Bounderby. "Nothing. Otherwise, don't you, Loo Bounderby, know thoroughly well that I, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, would have it?"

She looked at him, as he struck the table and made the teacups ring, with a proud colour in her face that was a new change, Mr. Harthouse thought. "You are incomprehensible this morning," said Louisa. "Pray take no further trouble to explain yourself. I am not curious to know your meaning. What does it matter?"

Nothing more was said on this theme, and Mr. Harthouse was soon idly gay on indifferent subjects. But from this day, the Sparsit action upon Mr. Bounderby threw Louisa and James Harthouse more together, and strengthened the dangerous alienation from her husband and confidence against him with another, into which she had fallen by degrees so fine that she could not retrace them if she tried. But whether she ever tried or no, lay hidden in her own closed heart.

Mrs. Sparsit was so much affected on this particular occasion, that, assisting Mr. Bounderby to his hat after breakfast, and being then alone with him in the hall, she imprinted a chaste kiss upon his hand, murmured "My benefactor!" and retired, overwhelmed with grief. Yet it is an indubitable fact, within the cognizance of this history, that five minutes after he had left the house in the self-same hat, the same descendant of the Scadgerses and connection by matrimony of the Powlers, shook her right-hand mitten at his portrait, made a contemptuous grimace at that work of art, and said "Serve you right, you Noodle, and I am glad of it."

Mr. Bounderby had not been long gone, when Bitzer appeared. Bitzer had come down by train, shrieking and rattling over the long line of arches that bestrode the wild country of past and present coalpits, with an express from Stone Lodge. It was a hasty note to inform Louisa, that Mrs. Gradgrind lay very ill. She had never been well within her daughter's knowledge; but, she had declined within the last few days, had continued sinking all through the night, and was now as nearly dead, as her limited capacity of being in any state that implied the ghost of an intention to get out of it allowed.

Accompanied by the lightest of porters, fit colourless servitor at Death's door when Mrs. Gradgrind knocked, Louisa rumbled to Coketown, over the coalpits past and present, and was whirled into its smoky jaws. She dismissed the messenger to his own devices, and rode away to her old home.

She had seldom been there since her marriage. Her father was usually sifting and sifting at his parliamentary cinder-heap in London (without being observed to turn up many precious articles among the rubbish), and was still hard at it in the national dust-yard. Her mother had taken it rather as a disturbance than otherwise, to be visited, as she reclined upon her sofa; young people, Louisa felt herself all unfit for; Sissy she had never softened to again, since the night when the stroller's child had raised her eyes to look at Mr. Bounderby's intended wife. She had no inducements to go back, and had rarely gone.

Neither, as she approached her old home now, did any of the best influences of old home descend upon her. The dreams of childhood—its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond: so good to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of this world, wherein it were better for all the children of Adam that they should oftener sun themselves, simple and trustful, and not worldly-wise—what had she to do with these? Remembrances of how she had journeyed to the little that she knew, by the enchanted roads of what she and millions of innocent creatures had hoped and imagined; of how,

first coming upon Reason through the tender light of Fancy, she had seen it a beneficent god, deferring to gods as great as itself: not a grim Idol, cruel and cold, with its victims bound hand to foot, and its big dumb shape set up with a sightless stare, never to be moved by anything but so many calculated tons of leverage—what had she to do with these? Her remembrances of home and childhood were remembrances of the drying up of every spring and fountain in her young heart as it gushed out. The golden waters were not there. They were flowing for the fertilisation of the land where grapes are gathered from thorns, and figs from thistles.

She went, with a heavy, hardened kind of sorrow upon her, into the house and into her mother's room. Since the time of her leaving home, Sissy had lived with the rest of the family on equal terms. Sissy was at her mother's side; and Jane, her sister, now ten or twelve years old, was in the room.

There was great trouble before it could be made known to Mrs. Gradgrind that her eldest child was there. She reclined, propped up, from mere habit, on a couch: as nearly in her old usual attitude, as anything so helpless could be kept in. She had positively refused to take to her bed; on the ground that if she did, she would never hear the last of it.

Her feeble voice sounded so far away in her bundle of shawls, and the sound of another voice addressing her seemed to take such a long time in getting down to her ears, that she might have been lying at the bottom of a well. The poor lady was nearer Truth than she ever had been: which had much to do with it.

On being told that Mrs. Bounderby was there, she replied, at cross-purposes, that she had never called him by that name since he married Louisa; that pending her choice of an objectionable name, she had called him J; and that she could not at present depart from that regulation, not being yet provided with a permanent substitute. Louisa had sat by her for some minutes, and had spoken to her often, before she arrived at a clear understanding who it was. She then seemed to come to it all at once.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Gradgrind, "and I hope you are going on satisfactorily to yourself. It was all your father's doing. He set his heart upon it. And he ought to know."

"I want to hear of you, mother; not of myself."

"You want to hear of me, my dear? That's something new, I am sure, when anybody wants to hear of me. Not at all well, Louisa. Very faint and giddy."

"Are you in pain, dear mother?"

"I think there's a pain somewhere in the room," said Mrs. Gradgrind, "but I couldn't positively say that I have got it."

After this strange speech, she lay silent for some time. Louisa, holding her hand, could feel no pulse; but kissing it, could see a slight thin thread of life in fluttering motion.

"You very seldom see your sister," said Mrs. Gradgrind. "She grows like you. I wish you would look at her. Sissy, bring her here."

She was brought, and stood with her hand in her sister's Louisa had observed her with her arm round Sissy's neck, and she felt the difference of this approach.

"Do you see the likeness, Louisa?"

"Yes, mother. I should think her like me. But——"

"Eh! Yes, I always say so," Mrs. Gradgrind cried, with unexpected quickness. "And that reminds me. I— I want to speak to you, my dear. Sissy, my good girl, leave us alone a minute."

Louisa had relinquished the hand: had thought that her sister's was a better and brighter face than hers had ever been: had seen in it, not without a rising feeling of resentment, even in that place and at that time, something of the gentleness of the other face in the room; the sweet face with the trusting eyes, made paler than watching and sympathy made it, by the rich dark hair.

Left alone with her mother, Louisa saw her lying with an awful lull upon her face, like one who was floating away upon some great water, all resistance over, content to be carried down the stream. She put the shadow of a hand to her lips again, and recalled her.

"You were going to speak to me, mother."

"Eh? Yes, to be sure, my dear. You know your father is almost always away now, and therefore I must write to him about it."

"About what, mother? Don't be troubled. About what?"

"You must remember, my dear, that whenever I have

said anything, on any subject, I have never heard the last of it: and consequently, that I have long left off saying anything."

"I can hear you, mother." But, it was only by dint of bending down to her ear, and at the same time attentively watching the lips as they moved, that she could link such faint and broken sounds into any chain of connection.

"You learnt a great deal, Louisa, and so did your brother. Ologies of all kinds from morning to night. If there is any Ology left, of any description, that has not been worn to rags in this house, all I can say is, I hope I shall never hear its name."

"I can hear you, mother, when you have strength to go on." This, to keep her from floating away.

"But there is something—not an Ology at all—that your father has missed, or forgotten, Louisa. I don't know what it is. I have often sat with Sissy near me, and thought about it. I shall never get its name now. But your father may. It makes me restless. I want to write to him, to find out for God's sake, what it is. Give me a pen, give me a pen."

Even the power of restlessness was gone, except from the poor head, which could just turn from side to side.

She fancied, however, that her request had been complied with, and that the pen she could not have held was in her hand. It matters little what figures of wonderful no-meaning she began to trace upon her wrappers. The hand soon stopped in the midst of them; the light that had always been feeble and dim behind the weak transparency, went out; and even Mrs. Gradgrind, emerged from the shadow in which man walketh and disquieteth himself in vain, took upon her the dread solemnity of the sages and patriarchs.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. SPARSIT'S STAIRCASE.

Mrs. Sparsit's nerves being slow to recover their tone, the worthy woman made a stay of some weeks in duration at Mr. Bounderby's retreat, where, notwithstanding her anchorite turn of mind based upon her becoming consciousness of her altered station, she resigned herself with noble fortitude to lodging, as one may say, in clover, and feeding on the fat of the land. During the whole term of this recess from the guardianship of the Bank, Mrs. Sparsit was a pattern of consistency; continuing to take such pity on Mr. Bounderby to his face, as is rarely taken on man, and to call his portrait a Noodle to *its* face, with the greatest acrimony and contempt.

Mr. Bounderby, having got it into his explosive composition that Mrs. Sparsit was a highly superior woman to perceive that he had that general cross upon him in his deserts (for he had not yet settled what it was), and further that Louisa would have objected to her as a frequent visitor if it had comported with his greatness that she should object to anything he chose to do, resolved not to lose sight of Mrs. Sparsit easily. So when her nerves were strung up to the pitch of again consuming sweetbreads in solitude, he said to her at the dinner-table, on the day before her departure, "I tell you what, ma'am; you shall come down here of a Saturday, while the fine weather lasts, and stay till Monday." To which Mrs. Sparsit returned, in effect, though not of the Mahomedan persuasion: "To hear is to obey."

Now, Mrs. Sparsit was not a poetical woman; but she took an idea in the nature of an allegorical fancy, into her head. Much watching of Louisa, and much consequent observation of her impenetrable demeanour, which keenly whetted and sharpened Mrs. Sparsit's edge, must have given her as it were a lift, in the way of inspiration. She erected in her mind a mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom; and down those stairs, from day to day and hour to hour, she saw Louisa coming.

It became the business of Mrs. Sparsit's life, to look up at her staircase, and to watch Louisa coming down. Sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes several steps at one bout, sometimes stopping, never turning back. If she had once turned back, it might have been the death of Mrs. Sparsit in spleen and grief.

She had been descending steadily, to the day, and on the day, when Mr. Bounderby issued the weekly invitation recorded above. Mrs. Sparsit was in good spirits, and inclined to be conversational.

"And pray, sir," said she, "if I may venture to ask a question appertaining to any subject on which you show reserve—which is indeed hardy in me, for I well know you have a reason for everything you do—have you received intelligence respecting the robbery?"

"Why, ma'am, no; not yet. Under the circumstances, I didn't expect it yet. Rome wasn't built in a day, ma'am."

"Very true, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, shaking her head.

"Nor yet in a week, ma'am."

"No, indeed, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, with a gentle melancholy upon her.

"In a similar manner, ma'am," said Bounderby, "I can wait, you know. If Romulus and Remus could wait, Josiah Bounderby can wait. They were better off in their youth than I was, however. They had a she-wolf for a nurse; *I* had only a she-wolf for a grandmother. She didn't give any milk, ma'am; she gave bruises. She was a regular Alderney at that."

"Ah!" Mrs. Sparsit sighed and shuddered.

"No, ma'am," continued Bounderby, "I have not heard anything more about it. It's in hand, though; and young Tom, who rather sticks to business at present—something new for him; he hadn't the schooling *I* had—is helping. My injunction is, Keep it quiet, and let it seem to blow over. Do what you like under the rose, but don't give a sign of what you're about; or half a hundred of 'em will combine together and get this fellow who has bolted, out of reach for good. Keep it quiet, and the thieves will grow in confidence by little and little, and we shall have 'em."

"Very sagacious indeed, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit. "Very interesting. The old woman you mentioned, sir——"

"The old woman I mentioned, ma'am," said Bounderby,

cutting the matter short, as it was nothing to boast about, "is not laid hold of; but, she may take her oath she will be, if that is any satisfaction to her villanous old mind. In the meantime, ma'am, I am of opinion, if you ask me my opinion, that the less she is talked about, the better."

That same evening, Mrs. Sparsit, in her chamber window, resting from her packing operations, looked towards her great staircase and saw Louisa still descending.

She sat by Mr. Harthouse, in an alcove in the garden, talking very low, he stood leaning over her, as they whispered together, and his face almost touched her hair. "If not quite!" said Mrs. Sparsit, straining her hawk's eyes to the utmost. Mrs. Sparsit was too distant to hear a word of their discourse, or even to know that they were speaking softly, otherwise than from the expression of their figures; but what they said was this:

"You recollect the man, Mr. Harthouse?"

"Oh, perfectly!"

"His face, and his manner, and what he said?"

"Perfectly. And an infinitely dreary person he appeared to me to be. Lengthy and prosy in the extreme. It was knowing to hold forth, in the humble-virtue school of eloquence; but, I assure you I thought at the time, 'My good fellow, you are overdoing this!'"

"It has been very difficult to me to think ill of that man."

"My dear Louisa—as Tom says." Which he never did say. "You know no good of the fellow?"

"No, certainly."

"Nor of any other such person?"

"How can I," she returned, with more of her first manner on her than he had lately seen, "when I know nothing of them, men or women?"

"My dear Louisa, then consent to receive the submissive representation of your devoted friend, who knows something of several varieties of his excellent fellow-creatures —for excellent they are, I am quite ready to believe, in spite of such little foibles as always helping themselves to what they can get hold of. This fellow talks. Well; every fellow talks. He professes morality. Well; all sorts of humbugs profess morality. From the House of Commons to the House of Correction, there is a general profession of morality, except among our people; it really is that excep-

tion which makes our people quite reviving. You saw and heard the case. Here was one of the fluffy classes pulled up extremely short by my esteemed friend Mr. Bounderby —who, as we know, is not possessed of that delicacy which would soften so tight a hand. The member of the fluffy classes was injured, exasperated, left the house grumbling, met somebody who proposed to him to go in for some share in this Bank business, went in, put something in his pocket which had nothing in it before, and relieved his mind extremely. Really he would have been an uncommon, instead of a common, fellow, if he had not availed himself of such an opportunity. Or he may have originated it altogether, if he had the cleverness."

"I almost feel as though it must be bad in me," returned Louisa, after sitting thoughtful awhile, "to be so ready to agree with you, and to be so lightened in my heart by what you say."

"I only say what is reasonable; nothing worse. I have talked it over with my friend Tom more than once—of course I remain on terms of perfect confidence with Tom—and he is quite of my opinion, and I am quite of his. Will you walk?"

They strolled away, among the lanes beginning to be indistinct in the twilight—she leaning on his arm—and she little thought how she was going down, down, down, Mrs. Sparsit's staircase.

Night and day, Mrs. Sparsit kept it standing. When Louisa had arrived at the bottom and disappeared in the gulf, it might fall in upon her if it would; but, until then, there it was to be, a Building, before Mrs. Sparsit's eyes. And there Louisa always was, upon it. And always gliding down, down, down!

Mrs. Sparsit saw James Harthouse come and go; she heard of him here and there; she saw the changes of the face he had studied; she, too, remarked to a nicety how and when it clouded, how and when it cleared; she kept her black eyes wide open, with no touch of pity, with no touch of compunction, all absorbed in interest. In the interest of seeing her, ever drawing, with no hand to stay her, nearer and nearer to the bottom of this new Giant's Staircase.

With all her deference for Mr. Bounderby as contradistinguished from his portrait, Mrs. Sparsit had not the

smallest intention of interrupting the descent. Eager to see it accomplished, and yet patient, she waited for the last fall, as for the ripeness and fulness of the harvest of her hopes. Hushed in expectancy, she kept her wary gaze upon the stairs; and seldom so much as darkly shook her right mitten (with her fist in it), at the figure coming down.

CHAPTER XI.

LOWER AND LOWER.

The figure descended the great stairs, steadily, steadily; always verging, like a weight in deep water, to the black gulf at the bottom.

Mr. Gradgrind, apprised of his wife's decease, made an expedition from London, and buried her in a business-like manner. He then returned with promptitude to the national cinder-heap, and resumed his sifting for the odds and ends he wanted, and his throwing of the dust about into the eyes of other people who wanted other odds and ends—in fact resumed his parliamentary duties.

In the meantime, Mrs. Sparsit kept unwinking watch and ward. Separated from her staircase, all the week, by the length of iron road dividing Coketown from the country-house, she yet maintained her cat-like observation of Louisa, through her husband, through her brother, through James Harthouse, through the outsides of letters and packets, through everything animate and inanimate that at any time went near the stairs. "Your foot on the last step, my lady," said Mrs. Sparsit, apostrophising the descending figure, with the aid of her threatening mitten, "and all your art shall never blind me."

Art or nature though, the original stock of Louisa's character or the graft of circumstances upon it,—her curious reserve did baffle, while it stimulated, one as sagacious as Mrs. Sparsit. There were times when Mr. James Harthouse was not sure of her. There were times when he could not read the face he had studied so long; and when this lonely girl was a greater mystery to him, than any woman of the world with a ring of satellites to help her.

So the time went on; until it happened that Mr. Bounderby was called away from home by business which required his presence elsewhere, for three or four days. It was on a Friday that he intimated this to Mrs. Sparsit at the Bank, adding: "But you'll go down to-morrow, ma'am, all the same. You'll go down just as if I was there. It will make no difference to you."

"Pray, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, reproachfully, "let me beg you not to say that. Your absence will make a vast difference to me, sir, as I think you very well know."

"Well, ma'am, then you must get on in my absence as well as you can," said Bounderby, not displeased.

"Mr. Bounderby," retorted Mrs. Sparsit, "your will is to me a law, sir; otherwise, it might be my inclination to dispute your kind commands, not feeling sure that it will be quite so agreeable to Miss Gradgrind to receive me, as it ever is to your own munificent hospitality. But you shall say no more, sir. I will go, upon your invitation."

"Why, when I invite you to my house, ma'am," said Bounderby, opening his eyes, "I should hope you want no other invitation."

"No, indeed, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "I should hope not. Say no more, sir. I would, sir, I could see you gay again."

"What do you mean, ma'am?" blustered Bounderby.

"Sir," rejoined Mrs. Sparsit, "there was wont to be an elasticity in you which I sadly miss. Be buoyant, sir!"

Mr. Bounderby, under the influence of this difficult adjuration, backed up by her compassionate eye, could only scratch his head in a feeble and ridiculous manner, and afterwards assert himself at a distance, by being heard to bully the small fry of business all the morning.

"Bitzer," said Mrs. Sparsit that afternoon, when her patron was gone on his journey, and the Bank was closing, "present my compliments to young Mr. Thomas, and ask him if he would step up and partake of a lamb chop and walnut ketchup, with a glass of India ale?" Young Mr. Thomas being usually ready for anything in that way, returned a gracious answer, and followed on its heels. "Mr. Thomas," said Mrs. Sparsit, "these plain viands being on table, I thought you might be tempted."

"Thank'ee, Mrs. Sparsit," said the whelp. And gloomily fell to.

"How is Mr. Harthouse, Mr. Tom?" asked Mrs. Sparsit.

"Oh, he's all right," said Tom.

"Where may he be at present?" Mrs. Sparsit asked in a light conversational manner, after mentally devoting the whelp to the Furies for being so uncommunicative.

"He is shooting in Yorkshire," said Tom. "Sent Loo a basket half as big as a church, yesterday."

"The kind of gentleman, now," said Mrs. Sparsit, sweetly, "whom one might wager to be a good shot!"

"Crack," said Tom.

He had long been a down-looking young fellow, but this characteristic had so increased of late, that he never raised his eyes to any face for three seconds together. Mrs. Sparsit consequently had ample means of watching his looks, if she were so inclined.

"Mr. Harthouse is a great favourite of mine," said Mrs. Sparsit, "as indeed he is of most people. May we expect to see him again shortly, Mr. Tom?"

"Why, *I* expect to see him to-morrow," returned the whelp.

"Good news!" cried Mrs. Sparsit, blandly.

"I have got an appointment with him to meet him in the evening at the station here," said Tom, "and I am going to dine with him afterwards, I believe. He is not coming down to the country house for a week or so, being due somewhere else. At least, he says so; but I shouldn't wonder if he was to stop here over Sunday, and stray that way."

"Which reminds me!" said Mrs. Sparsit. "Would you remember a message to your sister, Mr. Tom, if I was to charge you with one?"

"Well? I'll try," returned the reluctant whelp, "if it isn't a long un."

"It is merely my respectful compliments," said Mrs. Sparsit, "and I fear I may not trouble her with my society this week; being still a little nervous, and better perhaps by my poor self."

"Oh! If that's all," observed Tom, "it wouldn't much matter, even if I was to forget it, for Loo's not likely to think of you unless she sees you."

Having paid for his entertainment with this agreeable compliment, he relapsed into a hangdog silence until there

was no more India ale left, when he said, "Well, Mrs. Sparsit, I must be off!" and went off.

Next day, Saturday, Mrs. Sparsit sat at her window all day long looking at the customers coming in and out, watching the postmen, keeping an eye on the general traffic of the street, revolving many things in her mind, but, above all, keeping her attention on her staircase. The evening come, she put on her bonnet and shawl, and went quietly out: having her reasons for hovering in a furtive way about the station by which a passenger would arrive from Yorkshire, and for preferring to peep into its round pillars and corners, and out of ladies' waiting-room windows, to appearing in its precincts openly.

Tom was in attendance, and loitered about until the expected train came in. It brought no Mr. Harthouse. Tom waited until the crowd had dispersed, and the bustle was over; and then referred to a posted list of trains, and took counsel with porters. That done, he strolled away idly, stopping in the street and looking up it and down it, and lifting his hat off and putting it on again, and yawning and stretching himself, and exhibiting all the symptoms of mortal weariness to be expected in one who had still to wait until the next train should come in, an hour and forty minutes hence.

"This is a device to keep him out of the way," said Mrs. Sparsit, starting from the dull office window whence she had watched him last. "Harthouse is with his sister now!"

It was the conception of an inspired moment, and she shot off with her utmost swiftness to work it out. The station for the country house was at the opposite end of the town, the time was short, the road not easy; but she was so quick in pouncing on a disengaged coach, so quick in darting out of it, producing her money, seizing her ticket, and diving into the train, that she was borne along the arches spanning the land of coalpits past and present, as if she had been caught up in a cloud and whirled away.

All the journey, immovable in the air though never left behind; plain to the dark eyes of her mind, as the electric wires which ruled a colossal strip of music-paper out of the evening sky, were plain to the dark eyes of her body; Mrs. Sparsit saw her staircase, with the figure coming down. Very near the bottom now. Upon the brink of the abyss.

An overcast September evening, just at nightfall, saw beneath its drooping eyelid Mrs. Sparsit glide out of her carriage, pass down the wooden steps of the little station into a stony road, cross it into a green lane, and become hidden in a summer-growth of leaves and branches. One or two late birds sleepily chirping in their nests, and a bat heavily crossing and recrossing her, and the reek of her own tread in the thick dust that felt like velvet, were all Mrs. Sparsit heard or saw until she very softly closed a gate.

She went up to the house, keeping within the shrubbery, and went round it, peeping between the leaves at the lower windows. Most of them were open, as they usually were in such warm weather, but there were no lights yet, and all was silent. She tried the garden with no better effect. She thought of the wood, and stole towards it, heedless of long grass and briers: of worms, snails, and slugs, and all the creeping things that be. With her dark eyes and her hook nose warily in advance of her, Mrs. Sparsit softly crushed her way through the thick undergrowth, so intent upon her object that she probably would have done no less, if the wood had been a wood of adders.

Hark!

The smaller birds might have tumbled out of their nests, fascinated by the glittering of Mrs. Sparsit's eyes in the gloom, as she stopped and listened.

Low voices close at hand. His voice and hers. The appointment *was* a device to keep the brother away! There they were yonder, by the felled tree.

Bending low among the dewy grass, Mrs. Sparsit advanced closer to them. She drew herself up, and stood behind a tree, like Robinson Crusoe in his ambuscade against the savages; so near to them that at a spring, and that no great one, she could have touched them both. He was there secretly, and had not shown himself at the house. He had come on horseback, and must have passed through the neighbouring fields; for his horse was tied to the meadow side of the fence, within a few paces.

"My dearest love," said he, "what could I do? Knowing you were alone, was it possible that I could stay away?"

"You may hang your head, to make yourself the more attractive; *I* don't know what they see in you when you hold it up," thought Mrs. Sparsit; "but you little think, my dearest love, whose eyes are on you!"

That she hung her head, was certain. She urged him to go away, she commanded him to go away; but she neither turned her face to him, nor raised it. Yet it was remarkable that she sat as still as ever the amiable woman in ambuscade had seen her sit, at any period in her life. Her hands rested in one another like the hands of a statue; and even her manner of speaking was not hurried.

"My dear child," said Harthouse; Mrs. Sparsit saw with delight that his arm embraced her; "will you not bear with my society for a little while?"

"Not here."

"Where, Louisa?"

"Not here."

"But we have so little time to make so much of, and I have come so far, and am altogether so devoted, and distracted. There never was a slave at once so devoted and ill-used by his mistress. To look for your sunny welcome that has warmed me into life, and to be received in your frozen manner, is heart-rending."

"Am I to say again, that I must be left to myself here?"

"But we must meet, my dear Louisa. Where shall we meet?"

They both started. The listener started, guiltily, too; for she thought there was another listener among the trees. It was only rain, beginning to fall fast, in heavy drops.

"Shall I ride up to the house a few minutes hence, innocently supposing that its master is at home and will be charmed to receive me?"

"No!"

"Your cruel commands are implicitly to be obeyed; though I am the most unfortunate fellow in the world, I believe, to have been insensible to all other women, and to have fallen prostrate at last under the foot of the most beautiful, and the most engaging, and the most imperious. My dearest Louisa, I cannot go myself, or let you go, in this hard abuse of your power."

Mrs. Sparsit saw him detain her with his encircling arm, and heard him then and there, within her (Mrs. Sparsit's) greedy hearing, tell her how he loved her, and how she was the stake for which he ardently desired to play away all that he had in life. The objects he had lately pursued, turned worthless beside her; such success as was almost in his grasp, he flung away from him like the dirt it was, com-

pared with her. Its pursuit, nevertheless, if it kept him near her, or its renunciation if it took him from her, or flight if she shared it, or secrecy if she commanded it, or any fate, or every fate, all was alike to him, so that she was true to him,—the man who had seen how cast away she was, whom she had inspired at their first meeting with an admiration, an interest, of which he had thought himself incapable, whom she had received into her confidence, who was devoted to her and adored her. All this, and more, in his hurry, and in hers, in the whirl of her own gratified malice, in the dread of being discovered, in the rapidly increasing noise of heavy rain among the leaves, and a thunder-storm rolling up—Mrs. Sparsit received into her mind, set off with such an unavoidable halo of confusion and indistinctness, that when at length he climbed the fence and led his horse away, she was not sure where they were to meet, or when, except that they had said it was to be that night.

But one of them yet remained in the darkness before her; and while she tracked that one she must be right. "Oh, my dearest love," thought Mrs. Sparsit, "you little think how well attended you are!"

Mrs. Sparsit saw her out of the wood, and saw her enter the house. What to do next? It rained now, in a sheet of water. Mrs. Sparsit's white stockings were of many colours, green predominating; prickly things were in her shoes; caterpillars slung themselves, in hammocks of their own making, from various parts of her dress; rills ran from her bonnet, and her Roman nose. In such condition, Mrs. Sparsit stood hidden in the density of the shrubbery, considering what next?

Lo, Louisa coming out of the house! Hastily cloaked and muffled, and stealing away. She elopes! She falls from the lowermost stair, and is swallowed up in the gulf.

Indifferent to the rain, and moving with a quick determined step, she struck into a side-path parallel with the ride. Mrs. Sparsit followed in the shadow of the trees, at but a short distance; for it was not easy to keep a figure in view going quickly through the umbrageous darkness.

When she stopped to close the side-gate without noise, Mrs. Sparsit stopped. When she went on, Mrs. Sparsit went on. She went by the way Mrs. Sparsit had come, emerged from the green lane, crossed the stony road, and

ascended the wooden steps to the railroad. A train for Coketown would come through presently, Mrs. Sparsit knew; so she understood Coketown to be her first place of destination.

In Mrs. Sparsit's limp and streaming state, no extensive precautions were necessary to change her usual appearance; but, she stopped under the lee of the station wall, tumbled her shawl into a new shape, and put it on over her bonnet. So disguised she had no fear of being recognized when she followed up the railroad steps, and paid her money in the small office. Louisa sat waiting in a corner. Mrs. Sparsit sat waiting in another corner. Both listened to the thunder, which was loud, and to the rain, as it washed off the roof, and pattered on the parapets of the arches. Two or three lamps were rained out and blown out; so, both saw the lightning to advantage as it quivered and zigzagged on the iron tracks.

The seizure of the station with a fit of trembling, gradually deepening to a complaint of the heart, announced the train. Fire and steam, and smoke, and red light; a hiss, a crash, a bell, and a shriek; Louisa put into one carriage, Mrs. Sparsit put into another: the little station a desert speck in the thunder-storm.

Though her teeth chattered in her head from wet and cold, Mrs. Sparsit exulted hugely. The figure had plunged down the precipice, and she felt herself, as it were, attending on the body. Could she, who had been so active in the getting up of the funeral triumph, do less than exult? "She will be at Coketown long before him," thought Mrs. Sparsit, "though his horse is never so good. Where will she wait for him? And where will they go together? Patience. We shall see."

The tremendous rain occasioned infinite confusion, when the train stopped at its destination. Gutters and pipes had burst, drains had overflowed, and streets were under water. In the first instant of alighting, Mrs. Sparsit turned her distracted eyes towards the waiting coaches, which were in great request. "She will get into one," she considered, "and will be away before I can follow in another. At all risks of being run over, I must see the number, and hear the order given to the coachman."

But, Mrs. Sparsit was wrong in her calculation. Louisa got into no coach, and was already gone. The black eyes

kept upon the railroad-carriage in which she had travelled, settled upon it a moment too late. The door not being opened after several minutes, Mrs. Sparsit passed it and repassed it, saw nothing, looked in, and found it empty. Wet through and through: with her feet squelching and squashing in her shoes whenever she moved; with a rash of rain upon her classical visage; with a bonnet like an over-ripe fig; with all her clothes spoiled; with damp impressions of every button, string, and hook-and-eye she wore, printed off upon her highly connected back; with a stagnant verdure on her general exterior, such as accumulates on an old park fence in a mouldy lane; Mrs. Sparsit had no resource but to burst into tears of bitterness and say, "I have lost her!"

CHAPTER XII.

DOWN.

The national dustmen, after entertaining one another with a great many noisy little fights among themselves, had dispersed for the present, and Mr. Gradgrind was at home for the vacation.

He sat writing in the room with the deadly statistical clock, proving something no doubt—probably, in the main, that the Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist. The noise of the rain did not disturb him much; but it attracted his attention sufficiently to make him raise his head sometimes, as if he were rather remonstrating with the elements. When it thundered very loudly, he glanced towards Coketown, having it in his mind that some of the tall chimneys might be struck by lightning.

The thunder was rolling into distance, and the rain was pouring down like a deluge, when the door of his room opened. He looked round the lamp upon his table, and saw, with amazement, his eldest daughter.

"Louisa!"

"Father, I want to speak to you."

"What is the matter? How strange you look! And good Heaven," said Mr. Gradgrind, wondering more and more, "have you come here exposed to this storm?"

She put her hands to her dress, as if she hardly knew. "Yes." Then she uncovered her head, and letting her cloak and hood fall where they might, stood looking at him: so colourless, so dishevelled, so defiant and despairing, that he was afraid of her.

"What is it? I conjure you, Louisa, tell me what is the matter."

She dropped into a chair before him, and put her cold hand on his arm.

"Father, you have trained me from my cradle?"

"Yes, Louisa."

"I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny."

He looked at her in doubt and dread, vacantly repeating: "Curse the hour? Curse the hour?"

"How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here!"

She struck herself with both her hands upon her bosom.

"If it had ever been here, its ashes alone would save me from the void in which my whole life sinks. I did not mean to say this; but, father, you remember the last time we conversed in this room?"

He had been so wholly unprepared for what he heard now, that it was with difficulty he answered, "Yes, Louisa."

"What has risen to my lips now, would have risen to my lips then, if you had given me a moment's help. I don't reproach you, father. What you have never nurtured in me, you have never nurtured in yourself; but O! if you had only done so long ago, or if you had only neglected me, what a much better and much happier creature I should have been this day!"

On hearing this, after all his care, he bowed his head upon his hand and groaned aloud.

"Father, if you had known, when we were last together here, what even I feared while I strove against it—as it has been my task from infancy to strive against every natural prompting that has arisen in my heart; if you had known that there lingered in my breast, sensibilities, affections, weaknesses capable of being cherished into strength, defying all the calculations ever made by man, and no

more known to his arithmetic than his Creator is,—would you have given me to the husband whom I am now sure that I hate?"

He said, "No. No, my poor child."

"Would you have doomed me, at any time, to the frost and blight that have hardened and spoiled me? Would you have robbed me—for no one's enrichment—only for the greater desolation of this world—of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief, my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me, my school in which I should have learned to be more humble and more trusting with them, and to hope in my little sphere to make them better?"

"O no, no. No, Louisa."

"Yet, father, if I had been stone blind; if I had groped my way by my sense of touch, and had been free, while I knew the shapes and surfaces of things, to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them; I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving, more contented, more innocent and human in all good respects, than I am with the eyes I have. Now, hear what I have come to say."

He moved, to support her with his arm. She rising as he did so, they stood close together: she, with a hand upon his shoulder, looking fixedly in his face.

"With a hunger and thirst upon me, father, which have never been for a moment appeased; with an ardent impulse towards some region where rules, and figures, and definitions were not quite absolute; I have grown up, battling every inch of my way."

"I never knew you were unhappy, my child."

"Father, I always knew it. In this strife I have almost repulsed and crushed my better angel into a demon. What I have learned has left me doubting, misbelieving, despising, regretting, what I have not learned; and my dismal resource has been to think that life would soon go by, and that nothing in it could be worth the pain and trouble of a contest."

"And you so young, Louisa!" he said with pity.

"And I so young. In this condition, father—for I show you now, without fear or favour, the ordinary deadened state of my mind as I know it—you proposed my husband to me. I took him. I never made a pretence to him or you that I loved him. I knew, and, father, you knew, and he

knew, that I never did. I was not wholly indifferent, for I had a hope of being pleasant and useful to Tom. I made that wild escape into something visionary, and have slowly found out how wild it was. But Tom had been the subject of all the little tenderness of my life; perhaps he became so because I knew so well how to pity him. It matters little now, except as it may dispose you to think more leniently of his errors."

As her father held her in his arms, she put her other hand upon his other shoulder, and still looking fixedly in his face, went on.

"When I was irrevocably married, there rose up into rebellion against the tie, the old strife, made fiercer by all those causes of disparity which arise out of our two individual natures, and which no general laws shall ever rule or state for me, father, until they shall be able to direct the anatomist where to strike his knife into the secrets of my soul."

"Louisa!" he said, and said imploringly; for he well remembered what had passed between them in their former interview.

"I do not reproach you, father, I make no complaint. I am here with another object."

"What can I do, child? Ask me what you will."

"I am coming to it. Father, chance then threw into my way a new acquaintance; a man such as I had had no experience of; used to the world; light, polished, easy; making no pretences; avowing the low estimate of everything, that I was half afraid to form in secret; conveying to me almost immediately, though I don't know how or by what degrees, that he understood me, and read my thoughts. I could not find that he was worse than I. There seemed to be a near affinity between us. I only wondered it should be worth his while, who cared for nothing else, to care so much for me."

"For you, Louisa!"

Her father might instinctively have loosened his hold, but that he felt her strength departing from her, and saw a wild dilating fire in the eyes steadfastly regarding him.

"I say nothing of his plea for claiming my confidence. It matters very little how he gained it. Father, he did gain it. What you know of the story of my marriage, he soon knew, just as well."

Her father's face was ashy white, and he held her in both his arms.

"I have done no worse, I have not disgraced you. But if you ask me whether I have loved him, or do love him, I tell you plainly, father, that it may be so. I don't know."

She took her hands suddenly from his shoulders, and pressed them both upon her side; while in her face, not like itself—and in her figure, drawn up, resolute to finish by a last effort what she had to say—the feelings long suppressed broke loose.

"This night, my husband being away, he has been with me, declaring himself my lover. This minute he expects me, for I could release myself of his presence by no other means. I do not know that I am sorry, I do not know that I am ashamed, I do not know that I am degraded in my own esteem. All that I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!"

He tightened his hold in time to prevent her sinking on the floor, but she cried out in a terrible voice, "I shall die if you hold me! Let me fall upon the ground!" And he laid her down there, and saw the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet.

BOOK THE THIRD.—GARNERING.

CHAPTER I.

ANOTHER THING NEEDFUL.

Louisa awoke from a torpor, and her eyes languidly opened on her old bed at home, and her old room. It seemed, at first, as if all that had happened since the days when these objects were familiar to her were the shadows of a dream; but gradually, as the objects became more real to her sight, the events became more real to her mind.

She could scarcely move her head for pain and heaviness, her eyes were strained and sore, and she was very weak. A curious passive inattention had such possession of her, that the presence of her little sister in the room did not attract her notice for some time. Even when their eyes had met, and her sister had approached the bed, Louisa lay for minutes looking at her in silence, and suffering her timidly to hold her passive hand, before she asked:

"When was I brought to this room?"

"Last night, Louisa."

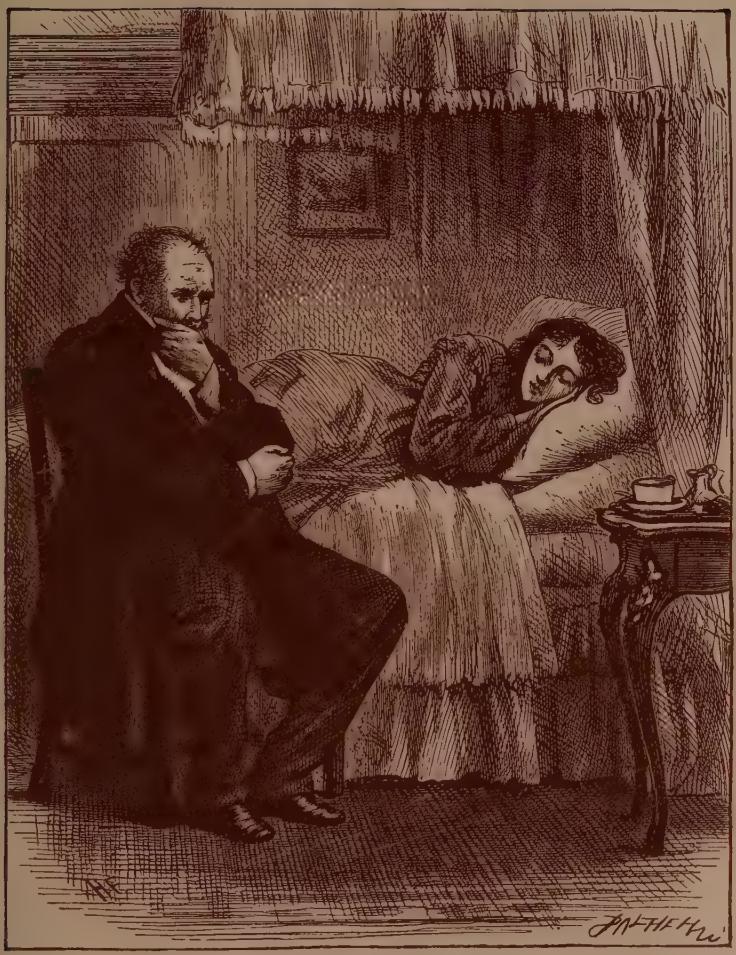
"Who brought me here?"

"Sissy, I believe."

"Why do you believe so?"

"Because I found her here this morning. She didn't come to my bedside to wake me, as she always does; and I went to look for her. She was not in her own room either; and I went looking for her all over the house, until I found her here taking care of you and cooling your head. Will you see father? Sissy said I was to tell him when you woke."

"What a beaming face you have, Jane!" said Louisa, as her young sister—timidly still—bent down to kiss her.



"I only entreat you to believe, my favorite child, that I have meant to do right," —*Hard Times*, B. III., ch. i., p. 199.

"Have I? I am very glad you think so. I am sure it must be Sissy's doing."

The arm Louisa had begun to twine about her neck, unbent itself. "You can tell father if you will." Then, staying her a moment, she said, "It was you who made my room so cheerful, and gave it this look of welcome?"

"Oh no, Louisa, it was done before I came. It was——"

Louisa turned upon her pillow, and heard no more. When her sister had withdrawn, she turned her head back again, and lay with her face towards the door, until it opened and her father entered.

He had a jaded anxious look upon him, and his hand, usually steady, trembled in hers. He sat down at the side of the bed, tenderly asking how she was, and dwelling upon the necessity of her keeping very quiet after her agitation and exposure to the weather last night. He spoke in a subdued and troubled voice, very different from his usual dictatorial manner; and was often at a loss for words.

"My dear Louisa. My poor daughter." He was so much at a loss at that place, that he stopped altogether. He tried again.

"My unfortunate child." The place was so difficult to get over, that he tried again.

"It would be hopeless for me, Louisa, to endeavour to tell you how overwhelmed I have been, and still am, by what broke upon me last night. The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet. The only support on which I leaned, and the strength of which it seemed and still does seem, impossible to question, has given way in an instant. I am stunned by these discoveries. I have no selfish meaning in what I say; but I find the shock of what broke upon me last night, to be very heavy indeed."

She could give him no comfort herein. She had suffered the wreck of her whole life upon the rock.

"I will not say, Louisa, that if you had by any happy chance undeceived me some time ago, it would have been better for us both; better for your peace, and better for mine. For I am sensible that it may not have been a part of my system to invite any confidence of that kind. I have proved my—my system to myself, and I have rigidly administered it; and I must bear the responsibility of its failures. I only entreat you to believe, my favourite child, that I have meant to do right."

He said it earnestly, and to do him justice he had. In gauging fathomless deeps with his little mean excise-rod, and in staggering over the universe with his rusty stiff-legged compasses, he had meant to do great things. Within the limits of his short tether he had tumbled about, annihilating the flowers of existence with greater singleness of purpose than many of the blatant personages whose company he kept.

"I am well assured of what you say, father. I know I have been your favourite child. I know you have intended to make me happy. I have never blamed you, and I never shall."

He took her outstretched hand, and retained it in his.

"My dear, I have remained all night at my table, pondering again and again on what has so painfully passed between us. When I consider your character; when I consider that what has been known to me for hours, has been concealed by you for years; when I consider under what immediate pressure it has been forced from you at last; I come to the conclusion that I cannot but mistrust myself."

He might have added more than all, when he saw the face now looking at him. He did add it in effect, perhaps, as he softly moved her scattered hair from her forehead with his hand. Such little actions, slight in another man, were very noticeable in him; and his daughter received them as if they had been words of contrition.

"But," said Mr. Gradgrind, slowly, and with hesitation, as well as with a wretched sense of helplessness, "if I see reason to mistrust myself for the past, Louisa, I should also mistrust myself for the present and the future. To speak unreservedly to you, I do. I am far from feeling convinced now, however differently I might have felt only this time yesterday, that I am fit for the trust you repose in me; that I know how to respond to the appeal you have come home to make to me; that I have the right instinct —supposing it for the moment to be some quality of that nature—how to help you, and to set you right, my child."

She had turned upon her pillow, and lay with her face upon her arm, so that he could not see it. All her wildness and passion had subsided; but, though softened, she was not in tears. Her father was changed in nothing so much as in the respect that he would have been glad to see her in tears.

"Some persons hold," he pursued, still hesitating, "that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart. I have not supposed so; but, as I have said, I mistrust myself now. I have supposed the head to be all-sufficient. It may not be all-sufficient; how can I venture this morning to say it is! If that other kind of wisdom should be what I have neglected, and should be the instinct that is wanted, Louisa——"

He suggested it very doubtfully, as if he were half unwilling to admit it even now. She made him no answer, lying before him on her bed, still half dressed, much as he had seen her lying on the floor of his room last night.

"Louisa," and his hand rested on her hair again, "I have been absent from here, my dear, a good deal of late; and though, your sister's training has been pursued according to —the system," he appeared to come to that word with great reluctance always, "it has necessarily been modified by daily associations begun, in her case, at an early age. I ask you—ignorantly and humbly, my daughter—for the better, do you think?"

"Father," she replied, without stirring, "if any harmony has been awakened in her young breast that was mute in mine until it turned to discord, let her thank Heaven for it, and go upon her happier way, taking it as her greatest blessing that she has avoided my way."

"O my child, my child!" he said, in a forlorn manner, "I am an unhappy man to see you thus! What avails it to me that you do not reproach me, if I so bitterly reproach myself!" He bent his head, and spoke low to her. "Louisa, I have a misgiving that some change may have been slowly working about me in this house, by mere love and gratitude: that what the Head had left undone and could not do, the Heart may have been doing silently. Can it be so?"

She made him no reply.

"I am not too proud to believe it, Louisa. How could I be arrogant, and you before me! Can it be so? Is it so, my dear?"

He looked upon her once more, lying cast away there; and without another word went out of the room. He had not been long gone, when she heard a light tread near the door, and knew that some one stood beside her.

She did not raise her head. A dull anger that she should

be seen in her distress, and that the involuntary look she had so resented should come to this fulfilment, smouldered within her like an unwholesome fire. All closely imprisoned forces rend and destroy. The air that would be healthful to the earth, the water that would enrich it, the heat that would ripen it, tear it when caged up. So in her bosom even now; the strongest qualities she possessed, long turned upon themselves, became a heap of obduracy, that rose against a friend.

It was well that soft touch came upon her neck, and that she understood herself to be supposed to have fallen asleep. The sympathetic hand did not claim her resentment. Let it lie there, let it lie.

It lay there, warming into life a crowd of gentler thoughts; and she rested. As she softened with the quiet, and the consciousness of being so watched, some tears made their way into her eyes. The face touched hers, and she knew that there were tears upon it too, and she the cause of them.

As Louisa feigned to rouse herself, and sat up, Sissy retired, so that she stood placidly near the bedside.

"I hope I have not disturbed you. I have come to ask if you would let me stay with you?"

"Why should you stay with me? My sister will miss you. You are everything to her."

"Am I?" returned Sissy, shaking her head. "I would be something to you, if I might."

"What?" said Louisa, almost sternly.

"Whatever you want most, if I could be that. At all events, I would like to try to be as near it as I can. And however far off that may be, I will never tire of trying. Will you let me?"

"My father sent you to ask me."

"No indeed," replied Sissy. "He told me that I might come in now, but he sent me away from the room this morning—or at least—" She hesitated and stopped.

"At least, what?" said Louisa, with her searching eyes upon her.

"I thought it best myself that I should be sent away, for I felt very uncertain whether you would like to find me here."

"Have I always hated you so much?"

"I hope not, for I have always loved you, and have al-

ways wished that you should know it. But you changed to me a little, shortly before you left home. Not that I wondered at it. You knew so much, and I knew so little, and it was so natural in many ways, going as you were among other friends, that I had nothing to complain of, and was not at all hurt."

Her colour rose as she said it modestly and hurriedly. Louisa understood the loving pretence, and her heart smote her.

"May I try?" said Sissy, emboldened to raise her hand to the neck that was insensibly drooping towards her.

Louisa, taking down the hand that would have embraced her in another moment, held it in one of hers, and answered:

"First, Sissy, do you know what I am? I am so proud and so hardened, so confused and troubled, so resentful and unjust to every one and to myself, that everything is stormy, dark, and wicked to me. Does not that repel you?"

"No!"

"I am so unhappy, and all that should have made me otherwise is so laid waste, that if I had been bereft of sense to this hour, and instead of being as learned as you think me, had to begin to acquire the simplest truths, I could not want a guide to peace, contentment, honour, all the good of which I am quite devoid, more abjectly than I do. Does not that repel you?"

"No!"

In the innocence of her brave affection, and brimming up of her old devoted spirit, the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other.

Louisa raised the hand that it might clasp her neck and join its fellow there. She fell upon her knees, and clinging to this stroller's child looked up at her almost with veneration.

"Forgive me, pity me, help me! Have compassion on my great need, and let me lay this head of mine upon a loving heart?"

"O lay it here!" cried Sissy. "Lay it here, my dear."

CHAPTER II.

VERY RIDICULOUS.

Mr. James Harthouse passed a whole night and a day in a state of so much hurry, that the World, with its best glass in its eye, would scarcely have recognised him during that insane interval, as the brother Jem of the honourable and jocular member. He was positively agitated. He several times spoke with an emphasis, similar to the vulgar manner. He went in and went out in an unaccountable way, like a man without an object. He rode like a highwayman. In a word, he was so horribly bored by existing circumstances, that he forgot to go in for boredom in the manner prescribed by the authorities.

After putting his horse at Coketown through the storm, as if it were a leap, he waited up all night: from time to time ringing his bell with the greatest fury, charging the porter who kept watch with delinquency in withholding letters or messages that could not fail to have been entrusted to him, and demanding restitution on the spot. The dawn coming, the morning coming, and the day coming, and neither message nor letter coming with either, he went down to the country-house. There, the report was, Mr. Bounderby away, and Mrs. Bounderby in town. Left for town suddenly last evening. Not even known to be gone until receipt of message, importing that her return was not to be expected for the present.

In these circumstances he had nothing for it but to follow her to town. He went to the house in town. Mrs. Bounderby not there. He looked in at the Bank. Mr. Bounderby away and Mrs. Sparsit away. Mrs. Sparsit away? Who could have been reduced to sudden extremity for the company of that griffin!

"Well! I don't know," said Tom, who had his own reasons for being uneasy about it. "She was off somewhere at daybreak this morning. She's always full of mystery; I hate her. So I do that white chap; he's always got his blinking eyes upon a fellow."

"Where were you last night, Tom?"

"Where was I last night!" said Tom. "Come! I like that. I was waiting for you, Mr. Harthouse, till it came down as *I* never saw it come down before. Where was I too! Where were you, you mean."

"I was prevented from coming—detained."

"Detained!" murmured Tom. "Two of us were detained. I was detained looking for you, till I lost every train but the mail. It would have been a pleasant job to go down by that on such a night, and have to walk home through a pond. I was obliged to sleep in town after all."

"Where?"

"Where? Why, in my own bed at Bounderby's."

"Did you see your sister?"

"How the deuce," returned Tom, staring, "could I see my sister when she was fifteen miles off?"

Cursing these quick retorts of the young gentleman to whom he was so true a friend, Mr. Harthouse disembarrassed himself of that interview with the smallest conceivable amount of ceremony, and debated for the hundredth time what all this could mean? He made only one thing clear. It was, that whether she was in the town or out of town, whether he had been premature with her who was so hard to comprehend, or she had lost courage, or they were discovered, or some mischance or mistake, at present incomprehensible, had occurred, he must remain to confront his fortune, whatever it was. The hotel where he was known to live when condemned to that region of blackness, was the stake to which he was tied. As to all the rest—What will be, will be.

"So, whether I am waiting for a hostile message, or an assignation, or a penitent remonstrance, or an impromptu wrestle with my friend Bounderby in the Lancashire manner—which would seem as likely as anything else in the present state of affairs—I'll dine," said Mr. James Harthouse. "Bounderby has the advantage in point of weight; and if anything of a British nature is to come off between us, it may be as well to be in training."

Therefore he rang the bell, and tossing himself negligently on a sofa, ordered "Some dinner at six—with a beefsteak in it," and got through the intervening time as well as he could. That was not particularly well; for he remained in the greatest perplexity, and, as the hours went

on, and no kind of explanation offered itself, his perplexity augmented at compound interest.

However, he took affairs as coolly as it was in human nature to do, and entertained himself with the facetious idea of the training more than once. "It wouldn't be bad," he yawned at one time, "to give the waiter five shillings, and throw him." At another time it occurred to him, "Or a fellow of about thirteen or fourteen stone might be hired by the hour." But these jests did not tell materially on the afternoon, or his suspense; and, sooth to say, they both lagged fearfully.

It was impossible, even before dinner, to avoid often walking about in the pattern of the carpet, looking out of the window, listening at the door for footsteps, and occasionally becoming rather hot when any steps approached that room. But, after dinner, when the day turned to twilight, and the twilight turned to night, and still no communication was made to him, it began to be as he expressed it, "like the Holy Office and slow torture." However, still true to his conviction that indifference was the genuine high-breeding (the only conviction he had), he seized this crisis as the opportunity for ordering candles and a newspaper.

He had been trying in vain, for half an hour, to read this newspaper, when the waiter appeared and said, at once mysteriously and apologetically:

"Beg your pardon, sir. You are wanted, sir, if you please."

A general recollection that this was the kind of thing the Police said to the swell mob, caused Mr. Harthouse to ask the waiter in return, with bristling indignation, what the Devil he meant by "wanted"?

"Beg your pardon, sir. Young lady outside, sir, wishes to see you."

"Outside? Where?"

"Outside this door, sir."

Giving the waiter to the personage before mentioned, as a blockhead duly qualified for that consignment, Mr. Harthouse hurried into the gallery. A young woman whom he had never seen stood there. Plainly dressed, very quiet, very pretty. As he conducted her into the room and placed a chair for her, he observed, by the light of the candles, that she was even prettier than he had at first believed.

Her face was innocent and youthful, and its expression remarkably pleasant. She was not afraid of him, or in any way disconcerted; she seemed to have her mind entirely preoccupied with the occasion of her visit, and to have substituted that consideration for herself.

"I speak to Mr. Harthouse?" she said, when they were alone.

"To Mr. Harthouse." He added in his mind, "And you speak to him with the most confiding eyes I ever saw, and the most earnest voice (though so quiet) I ever heard."

"If I do not understand—and I do not, sir"—said Sissy, "what your honour as a gentleman binds you to, in other matters:" the blood really rose in his face as she began in these words: "I am sure I may rely upon it to keep my visit secret, and to keep secret what I am going to say. I will rely upon it, if you will tell me I may so far trust—"

"You may, I assure you."

"I am young, as you see; I am alone, as you see. In coming to you, sir, I have no advice or encouragement beyond my own hope."

He thought "But that is very strong," as he followed the momentary upward glance of her eyes. He thought besides, "This is a very odd beginning. I don't see where we are going."

"I think," said Sissy, "you have already guessed whom I left just now!"

"I have been in the greatest concern and uneasiness during the last four-and-twenty hours (which have appeared as many years)," he returned, "on a lady's account. The hopes I have been encouraged to form that you come from that lady, do not deceive me, I trust."

"I left her within an hour."

"At——!"

"At her father's."

Mr. Harthouse's face lengthened in spite of his coolness, and his perplexity increased. "Then I certainly," he thought, "do *not* see where we are going."

"She hurried there last night. She arrived there in great agitation, and was insensible all through the night. I live at her father's, and was with her. You may be sure, sir, you will never see her again as long as you live."

Mr. Harthouse drew a long breath; and, if ever man found himself in the position of not knowing what to say,

made the discovery beyond all question that he was so circumstanced. The childlike ingenuousness with which his visitor spoke, her modest fearlessness, her truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come; all this, together with her reliance on his easily given promise—which in itself shamed him—presented something in which he was so inexperienced, and against which he knew any of his usual weapons would fall so powerless, that not a word could he rally to his relief.

At last he said:

"So startling an announcement, so confidently made, and by such lips, is really disconcerting in the last degree. May I be permitted to inquire, if you are charged to convey that information to me in those hopeless words, by the lady of whom we speak?"

"I have no charge from her."

"The drowning man catches at the straw. With no disrespect for your judgment, and with no doubt of your sincerity, excuse my saying that I cling to the belief that there is yet hope that I am not condemned to perpetual exile from that lady's presence."

"There is not the least hope. The first object of my coming here, sir, is to assure you that you must believe that there is no more hope of your ever speaking with her again, than there would be if she had died when she came home last night."

"Must believe? But if I can't—or if I should, by infirmity of nature, be obstinate—and won't—"

"It is still true. There is no hope."

James Harthouse looked at her with an incredulous smile upon his lips; but her mind looked over and beyond him, and the smile was quite thrown away.

He bit his lip, and took a little time for consideration.

"Well! If it should unhappily appear," he said, "after due pains and duty on my part, that I am brought to a position so desolate as this banishment, I shall not become the lady's persecutor. But you said you had no commission from her?"

"I have only the commission of my love for her, and her love for me. I have no other trust, than that I have been with her since she came home, and that she has given me her confidence. I have no further trust, than that I know

something of her character and her marriage. O Mr. Harthouse, I think you had that trust too!"

He was touched in the cavity where his heart should have been—in that nest of addled eggs, where the birds of heaven would have lived if they had not been whistled away—by the fervour of this reproach.

"I am not a moral sort of fellow," he said, "and I never make any pretensions to the character of a moral sort of fellow. I am as immoral as need be. At the same time, in bringing any distress upon the lady who is the subject of the present conversation, or in unfortunately compro mising her in any way, or in committing myself by any ex pression of sentiments towards her, not perfectly reconcilable with—in fact with—the domestic hearth; or in taking any advantage of her father's being a machine, or of her brother's being a whelp, or of her husband's being a bear; I beg to be allowed to assure you that I have had no particularly evil intentions, but have glided on from one step to another with a smoothness so perfectly diabolical, that I had not the slightest idea the catalogue was half so long until I began to turn it over. Whereas I find," said Mr James Harthouse, in conclusion, "that it is really in sev eral volumes."

Though he said all this in his frivolous way, the way seemed, for that once, a conscious polishing of but an ugly surface. He was silent for a moment; and then proceeded with a more self-possessed air, though with traces of vexation and disappointment that would not be polished out.

"After what has been just now represented to me, in a manner I find it impossible to doubt—I know of hardly any other source from which I could have accepted it so readily—I feel bound to say to you, in whom the confidence you have mentioned has been reposed, that I cannot refuse to contemplate the possibility (however unexpected) of my seeing the lady no more. I am solely to blame for the thing having come to this—and—and, I cannot say," he added, rather hard up for a general peroration, "that I have any sanguine expectation of ever becoming a moral sort of fellow, or that I have any belief in any moral sort of fellow whatever."

Sissy's face sufficiently showed that her appeal to him was not finished.

"You spoke," he resumed, as she raised her eyes to him

again, "of your first object. I may assume that there is a second to be mentioned?"

"Yes."

"Will you oblige me by confiding it?"

"Mr. Harthouse," returned Sissy, with a blending of gentleness and steadiness that quite defeated him, and with a simple confidence in his being bound to do what she required, that held him at a singular disadvantage, "the only reparation that remains with you, is to leave here immediately and finally. I am quite sure that you can mitigate in no other way the wrong and harm you have done. I am quite sure that it is the only compensation you have left it in your power to make. I do not say that it is much, or that it is enough; but it is something, and it is necessary. Therefore, though without any other authority than I have given you, and even without the knowledge of any other person than yourself and myself, I ask you to depart from this place to-night, under an obligation never to return to it."

If she had asserted any influence over him beyond her plain faith in the truth and right of what she said; if she had concealed the least doubt or irresolution, or had harboured for the best purpose any reserve or pretence; if she had shown, or felt, the lightest trace of any sensitiveness to his ridicule or his astonishment, or any remonstrance he might offer; he would have carried it against her at this point. But he could as easily have changed a clear sky by looking at it in surprise, as affect her.

"But do you know," he asked, quite at a loss, "the extent of what you ask? You probably are not aware that I am here on a public kind of business, preposterous enough in itself, but which I have gone in for, and sworn by, and am supposed to be devoted to in quite a desperate manner? You probably are not aware of that, but I assure you it's the fact."

It had no effect on Sissy, fact or no fact.

"Besides which," said Mr. Harthouse, taking a turn or two across the room, dubiously, "it's so alarmingly absurd. It would make a man so ridiculous, after going in for these fellows, to back out in such an incomprehensible way."

"I am quite sure," repeated Sissy, "that it is the only reparation in your power, sir. I am quite sure, or I would not have come here."

He glanced at her face, and walked about again. "Upon my soul, I don't know what to say. So immensely absurd!"

It fell to his lot, now, to stipulate for secrecy.

"If I were to do such a very ridiculous thing," he said, stopping again presently, and leaning against the chimney-piece, "it could only be in the most inviolable confidence."

"I will trust to you, sir," returned Sissy, "and you will trust to me."

His leaning against the chimney-piece reminded him of the night with the whelp. It was the self-same chimney-piece, and somehow he felt as if *he* were the whelp to-night. He could make no way at all.

"I suppose a man never was placed in a more ridiculous position," he said, after looking down, and looking up, and laughing, and frowning, and walking off, and walking back again. "But I see no way out of it. What will be, will be. *This* will be, I suppose. I must take off myself, I imagine—in short, I engage to do it."

Sissy rose. She was not surprised by the result, but she was happy in it, and her face beamed brightly.

"You will permit me to say," continued Mr. James Harthouse, "that I doubt if any other ambassador, or ambassadress, could have addressed me with the same success. I must not only regard myself as being in a very ridiculous position, but as being vanquished at all points. Will you allow me the privilege of remembering my enemy's name?"

"*My* name?" said the ambassadress.

"The only name I could possibly care to know, to-night."

"Sissy Jupe."

"Pardon my curiosity at parting. Related to the family?"

"I am only a poor girl," returned Sissy. "I was separated from my father—he was only a stroller—and taken pity on by Mr. Gradgrind. I have lived in the house ever since."

She was gone.

"It wanted this to complete the defeat," said Mr. James Harthouse, sinking, with a resigned air, on the sofa, after standing transfixed a little while. "The defeat may now be considered perfectly accomplished. Only a poor girl—only a stroller—only James Harthouse made nothing of—only James Harthouse a Great Pyramid of failure."

The Great Pyramid put it into his head to go up the Nile. He took a pen upon the instant, and wrote the following note (in appropriate hieroglyphics) to his brother:

"Dear Jack,—All up at Coketown. Bored out of the place, and going in for camels.

"Affectionately,

"Jem."

He rang the bell.

"Send my fellow here."

"Gone to bed, sir."

"Tell him to get up, and pack up."

He wrote two more notes. One to Mr. Bounderby, announcing his retirement from that part of the country, and showing where he would be found for the next fortnight. The other, similar in effect, to Mr. Gradgrind. Almost as soon as the ink was dry upon their superscriptions, he had left the tall chimneys of Coketown behind, and was in a railway carriage, tearing and glaring over the dark landscape.

The moral sort of fellows might suppose that Mr. James Harthouse derived some comfortable reflections afterwards, from this prompt retreat, as one of his few actions that made any amends for anything, and as a token to himself that he had escaped the climax of a very bad business. But it was not so, at all. A secret sense of having failed and been ridiculous—a dread of what other fellows who went in for similar sorts of things, would say at his expense if they knew it—so oppressed him, that what was about the very best passage in his life was the one of all others he would not have owned to on any account, and the only one that made him ashamed of himself.

CHAPTER III.

VERY DECIDED.

The indefatigable Mrs. Sparsit, with a violent cold upon her, her voice reduced to a whisper, and her stately frame so racked by continual sneezes that it seemed in danger of dismemberment, gave chase to her patron until she found him in the metropolis; and there, majestically sweeping in upon him at his hotel in St. James's Street, exploded the combustibles with which she was charged, and blew up. Having executed her mission with infinite relish, this high-minded woman then fainted away on Mr. Bounderby's coat collar.

Mr. Bounderby's first procedure was to shake Mrs. Sparsit off, and leave her to progress as she might through various stages of suffering on the floor. He next had recourse to the administration of potent restoratives, such as screwing the patient's thumbs, smiting her hands, abundantly watering her face, and inserting salt in her mouth. When these attentions had recovered her (which they speedily did), he hustled her into a fast train without offering any other refreshment, and carried her back to Coketown more dead than alive.

Regarded as a classical ruin, Mrs. Sparsit was an interesting spectacle on her arrival at her journey's end; but considered in any other light, the amount of damage she had by that time sustained was excessive, and impaired her claims to admiration. Utterly heedless of the wear and tear of her clothes and constitution, and adamant to her pathetic sneezes, Mr. Bounderby immediately crammed her into a coach, and bore her off to Stone Lodge.

"Now, Tom Gradgrind," said Bounderby, bursting into his father-in-law's room late at night; "here's a lady here —Mrs. Sparsit—you know Mrs. Sparsit—who has something to say to you that will strike you dumb."

"You have missed my letter!" exclaimed Mr. Gradgrind, surprised by the apparition.

"Missed your letter, sir!" bawled Bounderby. "The

present time is no time for letters. No man shall talk to Josiah Bounderby of Coketown about letters, with his mind in the state it's in now."

"Bounderby," said Mr. Gradgrind, in a tone of temperate remonstrance, "I speak of a very special letter I have written to you, in reference to Louisa."

"Tom Gradgrind," replied Bounderby, knocking the flat of his hand several times with great vehemence on the table, "I speak of a very special messenger that has come to me, in reference to Louisa. Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, stand forward!"

That unfortunate lady hereupon essaying to offer testimony, without any voice and with painful gestures expressive of an inflamed throat, became so aggravating and underwent so many facial contortions, that Mr. Bounderby, unable to bear it, seized her by the arm and shook her.

"If you can't get it out, ma'am," said Bounderby, "leave *me* to get it out. This is not a time for a lady, however highly connected, to be totally inaudible, and seemingly swallowing marbles. Tom Gradgrind, Mrs. Sparsit latterly found herself, by accident, in a situation to overhear a conversation out of doors between your daughter and your precious gentleman friend, Mr. James Harthouse."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Gradgrind.

"Ah! Indeed!" cried Bounderby. "And in that conversation——"

"It is not necessary to repeat its tenor, Bounderby. I know what passed."

"You do? Perhaps," said Bounderby, starting with all his might at his so quiet and assuasive father-in-law, "you know where your daughter is at the present time!"

"Undoubtedly. She is here."

"Here?"

"My dear Bounderby, let me beg you to restrain these loud outbreaks, on all accounts. Louisa is here. The moment she could detach herself from that interview with the person of whom you speak, and whom I deeply regret to have been the means of introducing to you, Louisa hurried here, for protection. I myself had not been at home many hours, when I received her—here, in this room. She hurried by the train to town, she ran from town to this house through a raging storm, and presented herself before me in a state of distraction. Of course, she has remained here

ever since. Let me entreat you, for your own sake and for hers, to be more quiet."

Mr. Bounderby silently gazed about him for some moments, in every direction except Mrs. Sparsit's direction; and then, abruptly turning upon the niece of Lady Scadgers, said to that wretched woman:

"Now, ma'am! We shall be happy to hear any little apology you may think proper to offer, for going about the country at express pace, with no other luggage than a Cock-and-a-Bull, ma'am!"

"Sir," whispered Mrs. Sparsit, "my nerves are at present too much shaken, and my health is at present too much impaired, in your service, to admit of my doing more than taking refuge in tears."

(Which she did.)

"Well, ma'am," said Bounderby, "without making any observation to you that may not be made with propriety to a woman of good family, what I have got to add to that, is that there is something else in which it appears to me you may take refuge, namely, a coach. And the coach in which we came here, being at the door, you'll allow me to hand you down to it, and pack you home to the Bank: where the best course for you to pursue, will be to put your feet into the hottest water you can bear, and take a glass of scalding rum and butter after you get into bed." With these words, Mr. Bounderby extended his right hand to the weeping lady, and escorted her to the conveyance in question, shedding many plaintive sneezes by the way. He soon returned alone.

"Now, as you showed me in your face, Tom Gradgrind, that you wanted to speak to me," he resumed, "here I am. But, I am not in a very agreeable state, I tell you plainly: not relishing this business, even as it is, and not considering that I am at any time as dutifully and submissively treated by your daughter, as Josiah Bounderby of Coketown ought to be treated by his wife. You have your opinion, I dare say; and I have mine, I know. If you mean to say anything to me to-night, that goes against this candid remark, you had better let it alone."

Mr. Gradgrind, it will be observed, being much softened, Mr. Bounderby took particular pains to harden himself at all points. It was his amiable nature.

"My dear Bounderby," Mr. Gradgrind began in reply.

"Now, you'll excuse me," said Bounderby, "but I don't want to be too dear. That, to start with. When I begin to be dear to a man, I generally find that his intention is to come over me. I am not speaking to you politely; but, as you are aware, I am *not* polite. If you like politeness, you know where to get it. You have your gentleman friends you know, and they'll serve you with as much of the article as you want. I don't keep it myself."

"Bounderby," urged Mr. Gradgrind, "we are all liable to mistakes——"

"I thought you couldn't make 'em," interrupted Bounderby.

"Perhaps I thought so. But, I say we are all liable to mistakes; and I should feel sensible of your delicacy, and grateful for it, if you would spare me these references to Harthouse. I shall not associate him in our conversation with your intimacy and encouragement; pray do not persist in connecting him with mine."

"I never mentioned his name!" said Bounderby.

"Well, well!" returned Mr. Gradgrind, with a patient, even a submissive, air. And he sat for a little while pondering. "Bounderby, I see reason to doubt whether we have ever quite understood Louisa."

"Who do you mean by We?"

"Let me say I, then," he returned, in answer to the coarsely blurted question; "I doubt whether I have understood Louisa. I doubt whether I have been quite right in the manner of her education."

"There you hit it," returned Bounderby. "There I agree with you. You have found it out at last, have you? Education! I'll tell you what education is—To be tumbled out of doors, neck and crop, and put upon the shortest allowance of everything except blows. That's what *I* call education."

"I think your good sense will perceive," Mr. Gradgrind remonstrated in all humility, "that whatever the merits of such a system may be, it would be difficult of general application to girls."

"I don't see it at all, sir," returned the obstinate Bounderby.

"Well," sighed Mr. Gradgrind, "we will not enter into the question. I assure you I have no desire to be controversial. I seek to repair what is amiss, if I possibly can;

and I hope you will assist me in a good spirit, Bounderby, for I have been very much distressed."

"I don't understand you, yet," said Bounderby, with determined obstinacy, "and therefore I won't make any promises."

"In the course of a few hours, my dear Bounderby," Mr. Gradgrind proceeded, in the same depressed and propitiatory manner, "I appear to myself to have become better informed as to Louisa's character, than in previous years. The enlightenment has been painfully forced upon me, and the discovery is not mine. I think there are—Bounderby, you will be surprised to hear me say this—I think there are qualities in Louisa, which—which have been harshly neglected, and—and a little perverted. And—and I would suggest to you, that—that if you would kindly meet me in a timely endeavour to leave her to her better nature for a while—and to encourage it to develop itself by tenderness and consideration—it—it would be the better for the happiness of all of us. Louisa," said Mr. Gradgrind, shading his face with his hand, "has always been my favourite child."

The blustrous Bounderby crimsoned and swelled to such an extent on hearing these words, that he seemed to be, and probably was, on the brink of a fit. With his very ears a bright purple shot with crimson, he pent up his indignation, however, and said:

"You'd like to keep her here for a time?"

"I—I had intended to recommend, my dear Bounderby, that you should allow Louisa to remain here on a visit, and be attended by Sissy (I mean of course Cecilia Jupe), who understands her, and in whom she trusts."

"I gather from all this, Tom Gradgrind," said Bounderby, standing up with his hands in his pockets, "that you are of opinion that there's what people call some incompatibility between Loo Bounderby and myself."

"I fear there is at present a general incompatibility between Louisa, and—and—and almost all the relations in which I have placed her," was her father's sorrowful reply.

"Now, look you here, Tom Gradgrind," said Bounderby the flushed, confronting him with his legs wide apart, his hands deeper in his pockets, and his hair like a hayfield wherein his windy anger was boisterous. "You have said your say; I am going to say mine. I am a Coketown man.

I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. I know the bricks of this town, and I know the works of this town, and I know the chimneys of this town, and I know the smoke of this town, and I know the Hands of this town. I know 'em all pretty well. They're real. When a man tells me anything about imaginative qualities, I always tell that man, whoever he is, that I know what he means. He means turtle-soup and venison, with a gold spoon, and that he wants to be set up with a coach and six. That's what your daughter wants. Since you are of opinion that she ought to have what she wants, I recommend you to provide it for her. Because, Tom Gradgrind, she will never have it from me."

"Bounderby," said Mr. Gradgrind, "I hoped, after my entreaty, you would have taken a different tone."

"Just wait a bit," retorted Bounderby, "you have said your say, I believe. I heard you out; hear me out, if you please. Don't make yourself a spectacle of unfairness as well as inconsistency, because, although I am sorry to see Tom Gradgrind reduced to his present position, I should be doubly sorry to see him brought so low as that. Now, there's an incompatibility of some sort or another, I am given to understand by you, between your daughter and me. I'll give *you* to understand, in reply to that, that there unquestionably is an incompatibility of the first magnitude—to be summed up in this—that your daughter don't properly know her husband's merits, and is not impressed with such a sense as would become her, by George! of the honour of his alliance. That's plain speaking, I hope."

"Bounderby," urged Mr. Gradgrind, "this is unreasonable."

"Is it?" said Bounderby. "I am glad to hear you say so. Because when Tom Gradgrind with his new lights, tells me that what I say is unreasonable, I am convinced at once it must be devilish sensible. With your permission I am going on. You know my origin; and you know that for a good many years of my life I didn't want a shoeing-horn, in consequence of not having a shoe. Yet you may believe or not, as you think proper, that there are ladies—born ladies—belonging to families—Families!—who next to worship the ground I walk on."

He discharged this like a Rocket, at his father-in-law's head.

"Whereas your daughter," proceeded Bounderby, "is far from being a born lady. That you know, yourself. Not that I care a pinch of candle-snuff about such things, for you are very well aware I don't; but that such is the fact, and you, Tom Gradgrind, can't change it. Why do I say this?"

"Not, I fear," observed Mr. Gradgrind, in a low voice, "to spare me."

"Hear me out," said Bounderby, "and refrain from cutting in till your turn comes round. I say this, because highly connected females have been astonished to see the way in which your daughter has conducted herself, and to witness her insensibility. They have wondered how I have suffered it. And I wonder myself now, and I won't suffer it."

"Bounderby," returned Mr. Gradgrind, rising, "the less we say to-night the better, I think."

"On the contrary, Tom Gradgrind, the more we say to-night, the better, I think. That is," the consideration checked him, "till I have said all I mean to say, and then I don't care how soon we stop. I come to a question that may shorten the business. What do you mean by the proposal you made just now?"

"What do I mean, Bounderby?"

"By your visiting proposition," said Bounderby, with an inflexible jerk of the hayfield.

"I mean that I hope you may be induced to arrange in a friendly manner, for allowing Louisa a period of repose and reflection here, which may tend to a gradual alteration for the better in many respects."

"To a softening down of your ideas of the incompatibility?" said Bounderby.

"If you put it in those terms."

"What made you think of this?" said Bounderby.

"I have already said, I fear Louisa has not been understood. Is it asking too much, Bounderby, that you, so far her elder, should aid in trying to set her right? You have accepted a great charge of her; for better for worse, for—"

Mr. Bounderby may have been annoyed by the repetition of his own words to Stephen Blackpool, but he cut the quotation short with an angry start.

"Come!" said he, "I don't want to be told about that.

I know what I took her for, as well as you do. Never you mind what I took her for; that's my look-out."

"I was merely going on to remark, Bounderby, that we may all be more or less in the wrong, not even excepting you; and that some yielding on your part, remembering the trust you have accepted, may not only be an act of true kindness, but perhaps a debt incurred towards Louisa."

"I think differently," blustered Bounderby. "I am going to finish this business according to my own opinions. Now, I don't want to make a quarrel of it with you, Tom Gradgrind. To tell you the truth, I don't think it would be worthy of my reputation to quarrel on such a subject. As to your gentleman friend, he may take himself off, wherever he likes best. If he falls in my way, I shall tell him my mind; if he don't fall in my way, I shan't, for it won't be worth my while to do it. As to your daughter, whom I made Loo Bounderby, and might have done better by leaving Loo Gradgrind, if she don't come home to-morrow, by twelve o'clock at noon, I shall understand that she prefers to stay away, and I shall send her wearing apparel and so forth over here, and you'll take charge of her for the future. What I shall say to people in general, of the incompatibility that led to my so laying down the law, will be this. I am Josiah Bounderby, and I had my bringing up: she's the daughter of Tom Gradgrind, and she had her bringing up; and the two horses wouldn't pull together. I am pretty well known to be rather an uncommon man, I believe; and most people will understand fast enough that it must be a woman rather out of the common, also, who, in the long run, would come up to my mark."

"Let me seriously entreat you to reconsider this, Bounderby," urged Mr. Gradgrind, "before you commit yourself to such a decision."

"I always come to a decision," said Bounderby, tossing his hat on: "and whatever I do, I do at once. I should be surprised at Tom Gradgrind's addressing such a remark to Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, knowing what he knows of him, if I could be surprised by anything Tom Gradgrind did, after his making himself a party to sentimental humbug. I have given you my decision, and I have got no more to say. Good night!"

So Mr. Bounderby went home to his town house to bed. At five minutes past twelve o'clock next day, he

directed Mrs. Bounderby's property to be carefully packed up and sent to Tom Gradgrind's; advertised his country retreat for sale by private contract; and resumed a bachelor life.

CHAPTER IV.

LOST.

The robbery at the Bank had not languished before, and did not cease to occupy a front place in the attention of the principal of that establishment now. In boastful proof of his promptitude and activity, as a remarkable man, and a self-made man, and a commercial wonder more admirable than Venus, who had risen out of the mud instead of the sea, he liked to show how little his domestic affairs abated his business ardour. Consequently, in the first few weeks of his resumed bachelorhood, he even advanced upon his usual display of bustle, and every day made such a route in renewing his investigations into the robbery, that the officers who had it in hand almost wished it had never been committed.

They were at fault too, and off the scent. Although they had been so quiet since the first outbreak of the matter, that most people really did suppose it to have been abandoned as hopeless, nothing new occurred. No implicated man or woman took untimely courage, or made a self-betraying step. More remarkable yet, Stephen Blackpool could not be heard of, and the mysterious old woman remained a mystery.

Things having come to this pass, and showing no latent signs of stirring beyond it, the upshot of Mr. Bounderby's investigations was, that he resolved to hazard a bold burst. He drew up a placard, offering Twenty Pounds reward for the apprehension of Stephen Blackpool, suspected of complicity in the robbery of the Coketown Bank on such a night; he described the said Stephen Blackpool by dress, complexion, estimated height, and manner, as minutely as he could; he recited how he had left the town, and in what direction he had been last seen going; he had the whole printed in great black letters on a staring broadsheet; and

he caused the walls to be posted with it in the dead of night, so that it should strike upon the sight of the whole population at one blow.

The factory-bells had need to ring their loudest that morning to disperse the group of workers who stood in the tardy daybreak, collected round the placards, devouring them with eager eyes. Not the least eager of the eyes assembled, were the eyes of those who could not read. These people, as they listened to the friendly voice that read aloud—there was always some such ready to help them—stared at the characters which meant so much with a vague awe and respect that would have been half ludicrous, if any aspect of public ignorance could ever be otherwise than threatening and full of evil. Many ears and eyes were busy with a vision of the matter of these placards, among turning spindles, rattling looms, and whirring wheels, for hours afterwards; and when the Hands cleared out again into the streets, there were still as many readers as before.

Slackbridge, the delegate, had to address his audience too that night; and Slackbridge had obtained a clean bill from the printer, and had brought it in his pocket. O my friends and fellow countrymen, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown, oh my fellow brothers and fellow workmen and fellow citizens and fellow men, what a to-do was there, when Slackbridge unfolded what he called "that damning document," and held it up to the gaze, and for the execration of the working-man community! "Oh my fellow men, behold of what a traitor in the camp of those great spirits who are enrolled upon the holy scroll of Justice and of Union, is appropriately capable! Oh my prostrate friends, with the galling yoke of tyrants on your necks and the iron foot of despotism treading down your fallen forms into the dust of the earth, upon which right glad would your oppressors be to see you creeping on your bellies all the days of your lives, like the serpent in the garden—oh my brothers, and shall I as a man not add, my sisters too, what do you say, *now*, of Stephen Blackpool, with a slight stoop in his shoulders and about five foot seven in height, as set forth in this degrading and disgusting document, this blighting bill, this pernicious placard, this abominable advertisement; and with what majesty of denouncement will you crush the viper, who would bring this stain and

shame upon the God-like race that happily has cast him out for ever! Yes, my compatriots, happily cast him out and sent him forth! For you remember how he stood here before you on this platform; you remember how, face to face and foot to foot, I pursued him through all his intricate windings; you remember how he sneaked and slunk, and sidled, and splitted of straws, until, with not an inch of ground to which to cling, I hurled him out from amongst us: an object for the undying finger of scorn to point at, and for the avenging fire of every free and thinking mind to scorch and sear! And now my friends—my labouring friends, for I rejoice and triumph in that stigma—my friends whose hard but honest beds are made in toil, and whose scanty but independent pots are boiled in hardship; and, now I say, my friends, what appellation has that dastard craven taken to himself, when, with the mask torn from his features, he stands before us in all his native deformity, a What? A thief! A plunderer! A proscribed fugitive, with a price upon his head; a fester and a wound upon the noble character of the Coketown operative! Therefore, my band of brothers in a sacred bond, to which your children and your children's children yet unborn have set their infant hands and seals, I propose to you on the part of the United Aggregate Tribunal, ever watchful for your welfare, ever zealous for your benefit, that this meeting does Resolve: That Stephen Blackpool, weaver, referred to in this placard, having been already solemnly disowned by the community of Coketown Hands, the same are free from the shame of his misdeeds, and cannot as a class be reproached with his dishonest actions!"

Thus Slackbridge; gnashing and perspiring after a prodigious sort. A few stern voices called out "No!" and a score or two hailed, with assenting cries of "Hear, hear!" the caution from one man, "Slackbridge, y' or over hetter int; y' or a goen too fast!" But these were pigmies against an army; the general assemblage subscribed to the gospel according to Slackbridge, and gave three cheers for him, as he sat demonstratively panting at them.

These men and women were yet in the streets, passing quietly to their homes, when Sissy, who had been called away from Louisa some minutes before, returned.

"Who is it?" asked Louisa.

"It is Mr. Bounderby," said Sissy, timid of the name,

"and your brother Mr. Tom, and a young woman who says her name is Rachael, and that you know her."

"What do they want, Sissy dear?"

"They want to see you. Rachael has been crying, and seems angry."

"Father," said Louisa, for he was present, "I cannot refuse to see them, for a reason that will explain itself. Shall they come in here?"

As he answered in the affirmative, Sissy went away to bring them. She reappeared with them directly. Tom was last; and remained standing in the obscurest part of the room, near the door.

"Mrs. Bounderby," said her husband, entering with a cool nod, "I don't disturb you, I hope. This is an unseasonable hour, but here is a young woman who has been making statements which render my visit necessary. Tom Gradgrind, as your son, young Tom, refuses for some obstinate reason or other to say anything at all about those statements, good or bad, I am obliged to confront her with your daughter."

"You have seen me once before, young lady," said Rachael, standing in front of Louisa.

Tom coughed.

"You have seen me, young lady," repeated Rachael, as she did not answer, "once before."

Tom coughed again.

"I have."

Rachael cast her eyes proudly towards Mr. Bounderby, and said, "Will you make it known, young lady, where, and who was there?"

"I went to the house where Stephen Blackpool lodged, on the night of his discharge from his work, and I saw you there. He was there too; and an old woman who did not speak, and whom I could scarcely see, stood in a dark corner. My brother was with me."

"Why couldn't you say so, young Tom?" demanded Bounderby.

"I promised my sister I wouldn't." Which Louisa hastily confirmed. "And besides," said the whelp bitterly, "she tells her own story so precious well—and so full—that what business had I to take it out of her mouth!"

"Say, young lady, if you please," pursued Rachael, "why in an evil hour, you ever came to Stephen's that night."

"I felt compassion for him," said Louisa, her colour deepening, "and I wished to know what he was going to do, and wished to offer him assistance."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Bounderby. "Much flattered and obliged."

"Did you offer him," asked Rachael, "a bank-note?"

"Yes; but he refused it, and would only take two pounds in gold."

Rachael cast her eyes towards Mr. Bounderby again.

"Oh certainly!" said Bounderby. "If you put the question whether your ridiculous and improbable account was true or not, I am bound to say it's confirmed."

"Young lady," said Rachael, "Stephen Blackpool is now named as a thief in public print all over this town, and where else! There have been a meeting to-night where he have been spoken of in the same shameful way. Stephen! The honestest lad, the truest lad, the best!" Her indignation failed her, and she broke off sobbing.

"I am very, very sorry," said Louisa.

"O young lady, young lady," returned Rachael, "I hope you may be, but I don't know! I can't say what you may ha' done! The like of you don't know us, don't care for us, don't belong to us. I am not sure why you may ha' come that night. I can't tell but what you may ha' come wi' some aim of your own, not mindin to what trouble you brought such as the poor lad. I said then, Bless you for coming; and I said it of my heart, you seemed to take so pitifully to him; but I don't know now, I don't know!"

Louisa could not reproach her for her unjust suspicions; she was so faithful to her idea of the man, and so afflicted.

"And when I think," said Rachael through her sobs, "that the poor lad was so grateful, thinkin you so good to him—when I mind that he put his hand over his hard-worken face to hide the tears that you brought up there—O, I hope you may be sorry, and ha' no bad cause to be it; but I don't know, I don't know!"

"You're a pretty article," growled the whelp, moving uneasily in his dark corner, "to come here with these precious imputations! You ought to be bundled out for not knowing how to behave yourself, and you would be by rights."

She said nothing in reply; and her low weeping was the only sound that was heard, until Mr. Bounderby spoke.

"Come!" said he, "you know what you have engaged to do. You had better give your mind to that; not this."

"'Deed, I am loath," returned Rachael, drying her eyes, "that any here should see me like this; but I won't be seen so again. Young lady, when I had read what's put in print of Stephen—and what had just as much truth in it as if it had been put in print of you—I went straight to the Bank to say I knew where Stephen was, and to give a sure and certain promise that he should be here in two days. I couldn't meet wi' Mr. Bounderby then, and your brother sent me away, and I tried to find you, but you was not to be found, and I went back to work. Soon as I come out of the Mill to-night, I hastened to hear what was said of Stephen—for I know wi' pride he will come back to shame it!—and then I went again to seek Mr. Bounderby, and I found him, and I told him every word I knew; and he believed no word I said, and brought me here."

"So far, that's true enough," assented Mr. Bounderby, with his hands in his pockets and his hat on. "But I have known you people before to-day, you'll observe, and I know you never die for want of talking. Now, I recommend you not so much to mind talking just now, as doing. You have undertaken to do something; all I remark upon that at present is, do it!"

"I have written to Stephen by the post that went out this afternoon, as I have written to him once before sin' he went away," said Rachael; "and he will be here, at furthest, in two days."

"Then, I'll tell you something. You are not aware perhaps," retorted Mr. Bounderby, "that you yourself have been looked after now and then, not being considered quite free from suspicion in this business, on account of most people being judged according to the company they keep. The post-office hasn't been forgotten either. What I'll tell you is, that no letter to Stephen Blackpool has ever got into it. Therefore, what has become of yours, I leave you to guess. Perhaps you're mistaken, and never wrote any."

"He hadn't been gone from here, young lady," said Rachael, turning appealingly to Louisa, "as much as a week, when he sent me the only letter I have had from him, saying that he was forced to seek work in another name."

"Oh, by George!" cried Bounderby, shaking his head, with a whistle, "he changes his name, does he! That's rather unlucky, too, for such an immaculate chap. It's considered a little suspicious in Courts of Justice, I believe, when an Innocent happens to have many names."

"What," said Rachael, with the tears in her eyes again, "what, young lady, in the name of Mercy, was left the poor lad to do! The masters against him on one hand, the men against him on the other, he only wantin to work hard in peace, and do what he felt right. Can a man have no soul of his own, no mind of his own? Must he go wrong all through wi' this side, or must he go wrong all through wi' that, or else be hunted like a hare?"

"Indeed, indeed, I pity him from my heart," returned Louisa; "and I hope that he will clear himself."

"You need have no fear of that, young lady. He is sure!"

"All the surer, I suppose," said Mr. Bounderby, "for your refusing to tell where he is? Eh?"

"He shall not, through any act of mine, come back wi' the unmerited reproach of being brought back. He shall come back of his own accord to clear himself, and put all those that have injured his good character, and he not here for its defence, to shame. I have told him what has been done against him," said Rachael, throwing off all distrust as a rock throws off the sea, "and he will be here, at furthest, in two days."

"Notwithstanding which," added Mr. Bounderby, "if he can be laid hold of any sooner, he shall have an earlier opportunity of clearing himself. As to you, I have nothing against you; what you came and told me turns out to be true, and I have given you the means of proving it to be true, and there's an end of it. I wish you good night all! I must be off to look a little further into this."

Tom came out of his corner when Mr. Bounderby moved, moved with him, kept close to him, and went away with him. The only parting salutation of which he delivered himself was a sulky "Good night, father!" With a brief speech, and a scowl at his sister, he left the house.

Since his sheet-anchor had come home, Mr. Gradgrind had been sparing of speech. He still sat silent, when Louisa mildly said:

"Rachael, you will not distrust me one day, when you know me better."

"It goes against me," Rachael answered, in a gentler manner, "to mistrust any one; but when I am so mistrusted —when we all are—I cannot keep such things quite out of my mind. I ask your pardon for having done you an injury. I don't think what I said now. Yet I might come to think it again, wi' the poor lad so wronged."

"Did you tell him in your letter," inquired Sissy, "that suspicion seemed to have fallen upon him, because he had been seen about the Bank at night? He would then know what he would have to explain on coming back, and would be ready."

"Yes, dear," she returned; "but I can't guess what can have ever taken him there. He never used to go there. It was never in his way. His way was the same as mine, and not near it."

Sissy had already been at her side asking her where she lived, and whether she might come to-morrow night, to inquire if there were news of him.

"I doubt," said Rachael, "if he can be here till next day."

"Then I will come next night too," said Sissy.

When Rachael, assenting to this, was gone, Mr. Gradgrind lifted up his head, and said to his daughter:

"Louisa, my dear, I have never, that I know of, seen this man. Do you believe him to be implicated?"

"I think I have believed it, father, though with great difficulty. I do not believe it now."

"That is to say, you once persuaded yourself to believe it, from knowing him to be suspected. His appearance and manner; are they so honest?"

"Very honest."

"And her confidence not be taken shaken! I ask myself," said Mr. Gradgrind, musing, "does the real culprit know of these accusations? Where is he? Who is he?"

His hair had latterly began to change its colour. As he leaned upon his hand again, looking grey and old, Louisa, with a face of fear and pity, hurriedly went over to him, and sat close at his side. Her eyes by accident met Sissy's at the moment. Sissy flushed and started, and Louisa put her finger on her lip.

Next night, when Sissy returned home and told Louisa

that Stephen was not come, she told it in a whisper. Next night again, when she came home with the same account, and added that he had not been heard of, she spoke in the same low frightened tone. From the moment of that interchange of looks, they never uttered his name, or any reference to him, aloud; nor ever pursued the subject of the robbery, when Mr. Gradgrind spoke of it.

The two appointed days ran out, three days and nights ran out, and Stephen Blackpool was not come, and remained unheard of. On the fourth day, Rachael, with unabated confidence, but considering her despatch to have miscarried, went up to the Bank, and showed her letter from him with his address, at a working colony, one of many, not upon the main road, sixty miles away. Messengers were sent to that place, and the whole town looked for Stephen to be brought in next day.

During this whole time the whelp moved about with Mr. Bounderby like his shadow, assisting in all the proceedings He was greatly excited, horribly fevered, bit his nails down to the quick, spoke in a hard rattling voice, and with lips that were black and burnt up. At the hour when the suspected man was looked for, the whelp was at the station; offering to wager that he had made off before the arrival of those who were sent in quest of him, and that he would not appear.

The whelp was right. The messengers returned alone. Rachael's letter had gone, Rachael's letter had been delivered, Stephen Blackpool had decamped in that same hour; and no soul knew more of him. The only doubt in Coketown was, whether Rachael had written in good faith, believing that he really would come back, or warning him to fly. On this point opinion was divided.

Six days, seven days, far on into another week. The wretched whelp plucked up a ghastly courage, and began to grow defiant. "*Was* the suspected fellow the thief? A pretty question! If not, where was the man, and why did he not come back?"

Where was the man, and why did he not come back? In the dead of night the echoes of his own words, which had rolled Heaven knows how far away in the daytime, came back instead, and abided by him until morning.

CHAPTER V

FOUND.

Day and night again, day and night again. No Stephen Blackpool. Where was the man, and why did he not come back?

Every night, Sissy went to Rachael's lodging, and sat with her in her small neat room. All day, Rachael toiled as such people must toil, whatever their anxieties. The smoke-serpents were indifferent who was lost or found, who turned out bad or good; the melancholy mad elephants, like the Hard Fact men, abated nothing of their set routine, whatever happened. Day and night again, day and night again. The monotony was unbroken. Even Stephen Blackpool's disappearance was falling into the general way, and becoming as monotonous a wonder as any piece of machinery in Coketown.

"I misdoubt," said Rachael, "if there is as many as twenty left in all this place, who have any trust in the poor dear lad now."

She said it to Sissy, as they sat in her lodging, lighted only by the lamp at the street corner. Sissy had come there when it was already dark, to wait her return from work; and they had since sat at the window where Rachael had found her, wanting no brighter light to shine on their sorrowful talk.

"If it hadn't been mercifully brought about, that I was to have you to speak to," pursued Rachael, "times are, when I think my mind would not have kept right. But I get hope and strength through you; and you believe that though appearances may rise against him, he will be proved clear?"

"I do believe so," returned Sissy, "with my whole heart. I feel so certain, Rachael, that the confidence you hold in yours against all discouragement, is not like to be wrong, that I have no more doubt of him than if I had known him through as many years of trial as you have."

"And I, my dear," said Rachael, with a tremble in her voice, "have known him through them all, to be, according

to his quiet ways, so faithful to everything honest and good, that if he was never to be heard of more, and I was to live to be a hundred years old, I could say with my last breath, God knows my heart. I have never once left trusting Stephen Blackpool!"

"We all believe, up at the Lodge, Rachael, that he will be freed from suspicion, sooner or later."

"The better I know it to be so believed there, my dear," said Rachael, "and the kinder I feel it that you come away from there, purposely to comfort me, and keep me company, and be seen wi' me when I am not yet free from all suspicion myself, the more grieved I am that I should ever have spoken those mistrusting words to the young lady. And yet—"

"You don't mistrust her now, Rachael?"

"Now that you have brought us more together, no. But I can't at all times keep out of my mind—"

Her voice so sunk into a low and slow communing with herself, that Sissy, sitting by her side, was obliged to listen with attention.

"I can't at all times keep out of my mind, mistrustings of some one. I can't think who 'tis, I can't think how or why it may be done, but I mistrust that some one has put Stephen out of the way. I mistrust that by his coming back of his own accord, and showing himself innocent before them all, some one would be confounded, who—to prevent that—has stopped him, and put him out of the way."

"That is a dreadful thought," said Sissy, turning pale.

"It *is* a dreadful thought to think he may be murdered."

Sissy shuddered, and turned paler yet.

"When it makes its way into my mind, dear," said Rachael, "and it will come sometimes, though I do all I can to keep it out, wi' counting on to high numbers as I work, and saying over and over again pieces that I knew when I were a child—I fall into such a wild, hot hurry, that, however tired I am, I want to walk fast, miles and miles. I must get the better of this before bedtime. I'll walk home wi' you."

"He might fall ill upon the journey back," said Sissy, faintly offering a worn-out scrap of hope; "and in such a case, there are many places on the road where he might stop."

"But he is in none of them. He has been sought for in all, and he's not there."

"True," was Sissy's reluctant admission.

"He'd walk the journey in two days. If he was foot-sore and couldn't walk, I sent him, in the letter he got, the money to ride, lest he should have none of his own to spare."

"Let us hope that to-morrow will bring something better, Rachael. Come into the air!"

Her gentle hand adjusted Rachael's shawl upon her shining black hair in the usual manner of her wearing it, and they went out. The night being fine, little knots of Hands were here and there lingering at street corners; but it was supper-time with the greater part of them, and there were but few people in the streets.

"You're not so hurried now, Rachael, and your hand is cooler."

"I get better, dear, if I can only walk, and breathe a little fresh. Times when I can't, I turn weak and confused."

"But you must not begin to fail, Rachael, for you may be wanted at any time to stand by Stephen. To-morrow is Saturday. If no news comes to-morrow, let us walk in the country on Sunday morning, and strengthen you for another week. Will you go?"

"Yes, dear."

They were by this time in the street where Mr. Bounderby's house stood. The way to Sissy's destination led them past the door, and they were going straight towards it. Some train had newly arrived in Coketown, which had put a number of vehicles in motion, and scattered a considerable bustle about the town. Several coaches were rattling before them and behind them as they approached Mr. Bounderby's, and one of the latter drew up with such briskness as they were in the act of passing the house, that they looked round involuntarily. The bright gaslight over Mr. Bounderby's steps showed them Mrs. Sparsit in the coach, in an ecstasy of excitement, struggling to open the door; Mrs. Sparsit seeing them at the same moment, called to them to stop.

"It's a coincidence," exclaimed Mrs. Sparsit, as she was released by the coachman. "It's a Providence! Come out, ma'am!" then said Mrs. Sparsit, to some one inside, "come out, or we'll have you dragged out!"

Hereupon, no other than the mysterious old woman descended. Whom Mrs. Sparsit incontinently collared.

"Leave her alone, everybody!" cried Mrs. Sparsit, with great energy. "Let nobody touch her. She belongs to me. Come in, ma'am!" then said Mrs. Sparsit, reversing her former word of command. "Come in, ma'am, or we'll have you dragged in!"

The spectacle of a matron of classical deportment, seizing an ancient woman by the throat, and haling her into a dwelling-house, would have been, under any circumstances, sufficient temptation to all true English stragglers so blest as to witness it, to force a way into that dwelling-house and see the matter out. But when the phenomenon was enhanced by the notoriety and mystery by this time associated all over the town, with the Bank robbery, it would have lured the stragglers in, with an irresistible attraction, though the roof had been expected to fall upon their heads. Accordingly, the chance witnesses on the ground, consisting of the busiest of the neighbours to the number of some five-and-twenty, closed in after Sissy and Rachael, as they closed in after Mrs. Sparsit and her prize; and the whole body made a disorderly irruption into Mr. Bounderby's dining-room, where the people behind lost not a moment's time in mounting on the chairs, to get the better of the people in front.

"Fetch Mr. Bounderby down!" cried Mrs. Sparsit. "Rachael, young woman; you know who this is?"

"It's Mrs. Pegler," said Rachael.

"I should think it is!" cried Mrs. Sparsit, exulting. "Fetch Mr. Bounderby. Stand away, everybody!" Here old Mrs. Pegler, muffling herself up, and shrinking from observation, whispered a word of entreaty. "Don't tell me," said Mrs. Sparsit, aloud, "I have told you twenty times, coming along, that I will *not* leave you till I have handed you over to him myself."

Mr. Bounderby now appeared, accompanied by Mr. Gradgrind and the whelp, with whom he had been holding conference upstairs. Mr. Bounderby looked more astonished than hospitable, at sight of this uninvited party in his dining-room.

"Why, what's the matter now!" said he. "Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am?"

"Sir," explained that worthy woman, "I trust it is my

good fortune to produce a person you have much desired to find. Stimulated by my wish to relieve your mind, sir, and connecting together such imperfect clues to the part of the country in which that person might be supposed to reside, as have been afforded by the young woman, Rachael, fortunately now present to identify, I have had the happiness to succeed, and to bring that person with me—I need not say most unwillingly on her part. It has not been, sir, without some trouble that I have effected this; but trouble in your service is to me a pleasure, and hunger, thirst, and cold a real gratification."

Here Mrs. Sparsit ceased; for Mr. Bounderby's visage exhibited an extraordinary combination of all possible colours and expressions of discomfiture, as old Mrs. Pegler was disclosed to his view.

"Why, what do you mean by this?" was his highly unexpected demand, in great warmth. "I ask you, what do you mean by this, Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Sparsit, faintly.

"Why don't you mind your own business, ma'am?" roared Bounderby. "How dare you go and poke your officious nose into my family affairs?"

This allusion to her favourite feature overpowered Mrs. Sparsit. She sat down stiffly in a chair, as if she were frozen; and with a fixed stare at Mr. Bounderby, slowly grated her mittens against one another, as if they were frozen too.

"My dear Josiah!" cried Mrs. Pegler, trembling. "My darling boy! I am not to blame. It's not my fault, Josiah. I told this lady over and over again, that I knew she was doing what would not be agreeable to you, but she would do it."

"What did you let her bring you for? Couldn't you knock her cap off, or her tooth out, or scratch her, or do something or other to her?" asked Bounderby.

"My own boy! She threatened me that if I resisted her, I should be brought by constables, and it was better to come quietly than make that stir in such a—" Mrs. Pegler glanced timidly but proudly round the walls—"such a fine house as this. Indeed, indeed, it is not my fault! My dear, noble, stately boy! I have always lived quiet and secret, Josiah, my dear. I have never broken the condition once. I have never said I was your mother. I have

admired you at a distance; and if I have come to town sometimes, with long times between, to take a proud peep at you, I have done it unbeknown, my love, and gone away again."

Mr. Bounderby, with his hands in his pockets, walked in impatient mortification up and down at the side of the long dining-table, while the spectators greedily took in every syllable of Mrs. Pegler's appeal, and at each succeeding syllable became more and more round-eyed. Mr. Bounderby still walking up and down when Mrs. Pegler had done, Mr. Gradgrind addressed that maligned old lady:

"I am surprised, ma'am," he observed with severity, "that in your old age you have the face to claim Mr. Bounderby for your son, after your unnatural and inhuman treatment of him."

"*Me* unnatural!" cried poor old Mrs. Pegler. "*Me* inhuman! To my dear boy?"

"Dear!" repeated Mr. Gradgrind. "Yes; dear in his self-made prosperity, madam, I dare say. Not very dear, however, when you deserted him in his infancy, and left him to the brutality of a drunken grandmother."

"*I* deserted my Josiah!" cried Mrs. Pegler, clasping her hands. "Now, Lord forgive you, sir, for your wicked imaginations, and for your scandal against the memory of my poor mother, who died in my arms before Josiah was born. May you repent of it, sir, and live to know better!"

She was so very earnest and injured, that Mr. Gradgrind, shocked by the possibility which dawned upon him, said in a gentler tone:

"Do you deny, then, madam, that you left your son to —to be brought up in the gutter?"

"Josiah in the gutter!" exclaimed Mrs. Pegler. "No such a thing, sir. Never! For shame on you! My dear boy knows, and will give *you* to know, that though he come of humble parents, he come of parents that loved him as dear as the best could, and never thought it hardship on themselves to pinch a bit that he might write and cipher beautiful, and I've his books at home to show it! Aye, have I!" said Mrs. Pegler, with indignant pride. "And my dear boy knows, and will give *you* to know, sir, that after his beloved father died, when he was eight years old, his mother, too, could pinch a bit, as it was her duty and her pleasure and her pride to do it, to help him out in life,

and put him 'prentice. And a steady lad he was, and a kind master he had to lend him a hand, and well he worked his own way forward to be rich and thriving. And *I*'ll give you to know, sir—for this my dear boy won't—that though his mother kept but a little village shop, he never forgot her, but pensioned me on thirty pound a year—more than I want, for I put by out of it—only making the condition that I was to keep down in my own part, and make no boast about him, and not trouble him. And I never have, except with looking at him once a year, when he has never knowed it. And it's right," said poor old Mrs. Pegler, in affectionate championship, "that I *should* keep down in my own part, and I have no doubts that if I was here I should do a many unbefitting things, and I am well contented, and I can keep my pride in my Josiah to myself, and I can love for love's own sake! And I am ashamed of you, sir," said Mrs. Pegler, lastly, "for your slanders and suspicions. And I never stood here before, nor never wanted to stand here when my dear son said no. And I shouldn't be here now, if it hadn't been for being brought here. And for shame upon you, O for shame, to accuse me of being a bad mother to my son, with my son standing here to tell you so different!"

The bystanders, on and off the dining-room chairs, raised a murmur of sympathy with Mrs. Pegler, and Mr. Gradgrind felt himself innocently placed in a very distressing predicament, when Mr. Bounderby, who had never ceased walking up and down, and had every moment swelled larger and larger, and grown redder and redder, stopped short.

"I don't exactly know," said Mr. Bounderby, "how I come to be favoured with the attendance of the present company, but I don't inquire. When they're quite satisfied, perhaps they'll be so good as to disperse; whether they're satisfied or not, perhaps they'll be so good as to disperse. I'm not bound to deliver a lecture on my family affairs, I have not undertaken to do it, and I'm not a going to do it. Therefore those who expect any explanation whatever upon that branch of the subject, will be disappointed—particularly Tom Gradgrind, and he can't know it too soon. In reference to the Bank robbery, there has been a mistake made, concerning my mother. If there hadn't been over-officiousness it wouldn't have been made, and I

hate over-officiousness at all times, whether or no. Good evening!"

Although Mr. Bounderby carried it off in these terms, holding the door open for the company to depart, there was a blustering sheepishness upon him, at once extremely crest-fallen and superlatively absurd. Detected as the Bully of humility, who had built his windy reputation upon lies, and in his boastfulness had put the honest truth as far away from him as if he had advanced the mean claim (there is no meaner) to tack himself on to a pedigree, he cut a most ridiculous figure. With the people filing off at the door he held, who he knew would carry what had passed to the whole town, to be given to the four winds, he could not have looked a Bully more shorn and forlorn, if he had had his ears cropped. Even that unlucky female, Mrs. Sparsit, fallen from her pinnacle of exultation into the Slough of Despond, was not in so bad a plight as that remarkable man and self-made Humbug, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown.

Rachael and Sissy, leaving Mrs. Pegler to occupy a bed at her son's for that night, walked together to the gate of Stone Lodge and there parted. Mr. Gradgrind joined them before they had gone very far, and spoke with much interest of Stephen Blackpool; for whom he thought this signal failure of the suspicions against Mrs. Pegler was likely to work well.

As to the whelp; throughout this scene as on all other late occasions, he had stuck close to Bounderby. He seemed to feel that as long as Bounderby could make no discovery without his knowledge, he was so far safe. He never visited his sister, and had only seen her once since she went home: that is to say on the night when he still stuck close to Bounderby, as already related.

There was one dim unformed fear lingering about his sister's mind, to which she never gave utterance, which surrounded the graceless and ungrateful boy with a dreadful mystery. The same dark possibility had presented itself in the same shapeless guise, this very day, to Sissy, when Rachael spoke of some one who would be confounded by Stephen's return, having put him out of the way. Louisa had never spoken of harbouring any suspicion of her brother in connection with the robbery, she and Sissy had held no confidence on the subject, save in that one in-

terchange of looks when the unconscious father rested his grey head on his hand; but it was understood between them, and they both knew it. This other fear was so awful, that it hovered about each of them like a ghostly shadow; neither daring to think of its being near herself, far less of its being near the other.

And still the forced spirit which the whelp had plucked up, throve with him. If Stephen Blackpool was not the thief, let him show himself. Why didn't he?

Another night. Another day and night. No Stephen Blackpool. Where was the man, and why did he not come back?

CHAPTER VI.

THE STARLIGHT.

The Sunday was a bright Sunday in autumn, clear and cool, when early in the morning Sissy and Rachael met, to walk in the country.

As Coketown cast ashes not only on its own head but on the neighbourhood's too—after the manner of those pious persons who do penance for their own sins by putting other people into sackcloth—it was customary for those who now and then thirsted for a draught of pure air, which is not absolutely the most wicked among the vanities of life, to get a few miles away by the railroad, and then begin their walk, or their lounge, in the fields. Sissy and Rachael helped themselves out of the smoke by the usual means, and were put down at a station about midway between the town and Mr. Bounderby's retreat.

Though the green landscape was blotted here and there with heaps of coal, it was green elsewhere, and there were trees to see, and there were larks singing (though it was Sunday), and there were pleasant scents in the air, and all was overarched by a bright blue sky. In the distance one way, Coketown showed as a black mist; in another distance hills began to rise; in a third, there was a faint change in the light of the horizon where it shone upon the far-off sea. Under their feet, the grass was fresh; beautiful shadows of branches flickered upon it, and speckled it; hedgerows

were luxuriant; everything was at peace. Engines at pits' mouths, and lean old horses that had worn the circle of their daily labour into the ground, were alike quiet; wheels had ceased for a short space to turn; and the great wheel of earth seemed to revolve without the shocks and noises of another time.

They walked on across the fields and down the shady lanes, sometimes getting over a fragment of a fence so rotten that it dropped at a touch of the foot, sometimes passing near a wreck of bricks and beams overgrown with grass, marking the site of deserted works. They followed paths and tracks, however slight. Mounds where the grass was rank and high, and where brambles, dock-weed, and such-like vegetation, were confusedly heaped together, they always avoided; for dismal stories were told in that country of the old pits hidden beneath such indications.

The sun was high when they sat down to rest. They had seen no one, near or distant, for a long time; and the solitude remained unbroken. "It is so still here, Rachael, and the way is so untrodden, that I think we must be the first who have been here all the summer."

As Sissy said it, her eyes were attracted by another of those rotten fragments of fence upon the ground. She got up to look at it. "And yet I don't know. This has not been broken very long. The wood is quite fresh where it gave way. Here are footsteps too.—O Rachael!"

She ran back, and caught her round the neck. Rachael had already started up.

"What is the matter?"

"I don't know. There is a hat lying in the grass."

They went forward together. Rachael took it up, shaking from head to foot. She broke into a passion of tears and lamentations: Stephen Blackpool was written in his own hand on the inside.

"O the poor lad, the poor lad! He has been made away with. He is lying murdered here!"

"Is there—has the hat any blood upon it?" Sissy faltered.

They were afraid to look; but they did examine it, and found no mark of violence, inside or out. It had been lying there some days, for rain and dew had stained it, and the mark of its shape was on the grass where it had fallen. They looked fearfully about them, without moving, but

could see nothing more. "Rachael," Sissy whispered, "I will go on a little way by myself."

She had unclasped her hand, and was in the act of stepping forward, when Rachael caught her in both arms with a scream that resounded over the wide landscape. Before them, at their very feet, was the brink of a black ragged chasm hidden by the thick grass. They sprang back, and fell upon their knees, each hiding her face upon the other's neck.

"O, my good Lord! He's down there! Down there!" At first this, and her terrific screams, were all that could be got from Rachael, by any tears, by any prayers, by any representations, by any means. It was impossible to hush her; and it was deadly necessary to hold her, or she would have flung herself down the shaft.

"Rachael, dear Rachael, good Rachael, for the love of Heaven, not these dreadful cries! Think of Stephen, think of Stephen, think of Stephen!"

By an earnest repetition of this entreaty, poured out in all the agony of such a moment, Sissy at last brought her to be silent, and to look at her with a tearless face of stone.

"Rachael, Stephen may be living. You wouldn't leave him lying maimed at the bottom of this dreadful place, a moment, if you could bring help to him?"

"No, no, no!"

"Don't stir from here, for his sake! Let me go and listen."

She shuddered to approach the pit; but she crept towards it on her hands and knees, and called to him as loud as she could call. She listened, but no sound replied. She called again and listened; still no answering sound. She did this, twenty, thirty times. She took a little clod of earth from the broken ground where he had stumbled, and threw it in. She could not hear it fall.

The wide prospect, so beautiful in its stillness but a few minutes ago, almost carried despair to her brave heart, as she rose and looked all round her, seeing no help. "Rachael, we must lose not a moment. We must go in different directions, seeking aid. You shall go by the way we have come, and I will go forward by the path. Tell any one you see, and every one what has happened. Think of Stephen, think of Stephen!"

She knew by Rachael's face that she might trust her now.

And after standing for a moment to see her running, wringing her hands as she ran, she turned and went upon her own search, she stopped at the hedge to tie her shawl there as a guide to the place, then threw her bonnet aside, and ran as she had never run before.

Run, Sissy, run, in Heaven's name! Don't stop for breath. Run, run! Quickening herself by carrying such entreaties in her thoughts, she ran from field to field, and lane to lane, and place to place, as she had never run before; until she came to a shed by an engine-house, where two men lay in the shade, asleep on straw.

First to wake them, and next to tell them, all so wild and breathless as she was, what had brought her there, were difficulties; but they no sooner understood her than their spirits were on fire like hers. One of the men was in a drunken slumber, but on his comrade's shouting to him that a man had fallen down the Old Hell Shaft, he started out to a pool of dirty water, put his head in it, and came back sober.

With these two men she ran to another half a mile further, and with that one to another, while they ran elsewhere. Then a horse was found; and she got another man to ride for life or death to the railroad, and send a message to Louisa, which she wrote and gave him. By this time a whole village was up; and windlasses, ropes, poles, candles, lanterns, all things necessary, were fast collecting and being brought into one place, to be carried to the Old Hell Shaft.

It seemed now hours and hours since she had left the lost man lying in the grave where he had been buried alive. She could not bear to remain away from it any longer—it was like deserting him—and she hurried swiftly back, accompanied by a half a dozen labourers, including the drunken man whom the news had sobered, and who was the best man of all. When they came to the Old Hell Shaft, they found it as lonely as she had left it. The men called and listened as she had done, and examined the edge of the chasm, and settled how it had happened, and then sat down to wait until the implements they wanted should come up.

Every sound of insects in the air, every stirring of the leaves, every whisper among these men, made Sissy tremble, for she thought it was a cry at the bottom of the pit. But the wind blew idly over it, and no sound arose to the

surface, and they sat upon the grass, waiting and waiting. After they had waited some time, straggling people who had heard of the accident began to come up; then the real help of implements began to arrive. In the midst of this, Rachael returned; and with her party there was a surgeon, who brought some wine and medicines. But, the expectation among the people that the man would be found alive, was very slight indeed.

There being now people enough present to impede the work, the sobered man put himself at the head of the rest, or was put there by the general consent, and made a large ring round the Old Hell Shaft, and appointed men to keep it. Besides such volunteers as were accepted to work, only Sissy and Rachael were at first permitted within this ring; but, later in the day, when the message brought an express from Coketown, Mr. Gradgrind and Louisa, and Mr. Bounderby, and the whelp, were also there.

The sun was four hours lower than when Sissy and Rachael had first sat down upon the grass, before a means of enabling two men to descend securely was rigged with poles and ropes. Difficulties had arisen in the construction of this machine, simple as it was; requisites had been found wanting, and messages had had to go and return. It was five o'clock in the afternoon of the bright autumnal Sunday, before a candle was sent down to try the air, while three or four rough faces stood crowded close together, attentively watching it: the men at the windlass lowering as they were told. The candle was brought up again, feebly burning, and then some water was cast in. Then the bucket was hooked on; and the sobered man and another got in with lights, giving the word "Lower away!"

As the rope went out, tight and strained, and the windlass creaked, there was not a breath among the one or two hundred men and women looking on, that came as it was wont to come. The signal was given and the windlass stopped, with abundant rope to spare. Apparently so long an interval ensued with the men at the windlass standing idle, that some women shrieked that another accident had happened! But the surgeon who held the watch, declared five minutes not to have elapsed yet, and sternly admonished them to keep silence. He had not well done speaking, when the windlass was reversed and worked again. Practised eyes knew that it did not go as heavily as it

would if both workmen had been coming up, and that only one was returning.

The rope came in tight and strained; and ring after ring was coiled upon the barrel of the windlass, and all eyes were fastened on the pit. The sobered man was brought up and leaped out briskly on the grass. There was an universal cry of "Alive or dead?" and then a deep, profound hush.

When he said "Alive!" a great shout arose and many eyes had tears in them.

"But he's hurt very bad," he added, as soon as he could make himself heard again. "Where's doctor? He's hurt so very bad, sir, that we donno how to get him up."

They all consulted together, and looked anxiously at the surgeon, as he asked some questions, and shook his head on receiving the replies. The sun was setting now; and the red light in the evening sky touched every face there, and caused it to be distinctly seen in all its wrapt suspense.

The consultation ended in the men returning to the windlass, and the pitman going down again, carrying the wine and some other small matters with him. Then the other man came up. In the meantime, under the surgeon's directions, some men brought a hurdle, on which others made a thick bed of spare clothes covered with loose straw, while he himself contrived some bandages and slings from shawls and handkerchiefs. As these were made, they were hung upon an arm of the pitman who had last come up, with instructions how to use them: and as he stood, shown by the light he carried, leaning his powerful loose hand upon one of the poles, and sometimes glancing down the pit, and sometimes glancing round upon the people, he was not the least conspicuous figure in the scene. It was dark now, and torches were kindled.

It appeared from the little this man said to those about him, which was quickly repeated all over the circle, that the lost man had fallen upon a mass of crumbled rubbish with which the pit was half choked up, and that his fall had been further broken by some jagged earth at the side He lay upon his back with one arm doubled under him, and according to his own belief had hardly stirred since he fell, except that he had moved his free hand to a side pocket, in which he remembered to have some bread and meat (of which he had swallowed crumbs), and had likewise scooped

up a little water in it now and then. He had come straight away from his work, on being written to, and had walked the whole journey; and was on his way to Mr. Bounderby's country house after dark, when he fell. He was crossing that dangerous country at such a dangerous time, because he was innocent of what was laid to his charge, and couldn't rest from coming the nearest way to deliver himself up. The Old Hell Shaft, the pitman said, with a curse upon it, was worthy of its bad name to the last; for though Stephen could speak now, he believed it would soon be found to have mangled the life out of him.

When all was ready, this man, still taking his last hurried charges from his comrades and the surgeon after the windlass had begun to lower him, disappeared into the pit. The rope went out as before, the signal was made as before, and the windlass stopped. No man removed his hand from it now. Every one waited with his grasp set, and his body bent down to the work, ready to reverse and wind in. At length the signal was given, and all the ring leaned forward.

For, now, the rope came in, tightened and strained to its utmost as it appeared, and the men turned heavily, and the windlass complained. It was scarcely endurable to look at the rope, and think of its giving way. But, ring after ring was coiled upon the barrel of the windlass safely, and the connecting chains appeared, and finally the bucket with the two men holding on at the sides—a sight to make the head swim, and oppress the heart—and tenderly supporting between them, slung and tied within, the figure of a poor, crushed, human creature.

A low murmur of pity went round the throng, and the women wept aloud, as this form, almost without form, was moved very slowly from its iron deliverance, and laid upon the bed of straw. At first, none but the surgeon went close to it. He did what he could in its adjustment on the couch, but the best that he could do was to cover it. That gently done, he called to him Rachael and Sissy. And at that time the pale, worn, patient face was seen looking up at the sky, with the broken right hand lying bare on the outside of the covering garments, as if waiting to be taken by another hand.

They gave him drink, moistened his face with water, and administered some drops of cordial and wine. Though he

lay quite motionless looking up at the sky, he smiled and said, "Rachael."

She stooped down on the grass at his side, and bent over him until her eyes were between his and the sky, for he could not so much as turn them to look at her.

"Rachael, my dear."

She took his hand. He smiled again and said, "Don't let 't go."

"Thou'rt in great pain, my own dear Stephen?"

"I ha' been, but not now. I ha' been—dreadful, and dree, and long, my dear—but 'tis ower now. Ah, Rachael, aw a muddle! Fro' first to last, a muddle!"

The spectre of his old look seemed to pass as he said the word.

"I ha' fell into th' pit, my dear, as have cost wi'in the knowledge o' old fok now livin, hundreds and hundreds o' men's lives—fathers, sons, brothers, dear to thousands an thousands, an keeping 'em fro' want and hunger. I ha' fell into a pit that ha' been wi' th' Fire-damp crueller than battle. I ha' read on 't in the public petition, as onny one may read, fro' the men that works in pits, in which they ha' pray'n and pray'n the lawmakers for Christ's sake not to let their work be murder to 'em, but to spare 'em for th' wives and children that they loves as well as gentlefok loves theirs. When it were in work, it killed wi'out need; when 'tis let alone, it kills wi'out need. See how we die an no need, one way an another—in a muddle—every day!"

He faintly said it, without any anger against any one. Merely as the truth.

"Thy little sister, Rachael, thou hast not forgot her. Thou'rt not like to forget her now, and me so nigh her. Thou know'st—poor, patient, suff'rin, dear—how thou didst work for her, seet'n all day long in her little chair at thy winder, and how she died, young and misshapen, awlung o' sickly air as had'n no need to be, an awlung o' working people's miserable homes. A muddle! Aw a muddle!"

Louisa approached him; but he could not see her, lying with his face turned up to the night sky.

"If aw th' things that tooches us, my dear, was not so muddled, I should'n ha' had'n need to coom heer. If we was not in a muddle among ourseln, I should'n ha' been, by my own fellow weavers and workin' brothers, so mis-

took. If Mr. Bounderby had ever know'd me right—if he'd ever know'd me at aw—he would'n ha' took'n offence wi' me. He would'n ha' suspect'n me. But look up yonder, Rachael! Look aboove!"

Following his eyes, she saw that he was gazing at a star.

"It ha' shined upon me," he said reverently, "in my pain and trouble down below. It ha' shined into my mind. I ha' look'n at 't and thowt o' thee, Rachael, till the muddle in my mind have cleared awa, above a bit, I hope. If soom ha' been wantin' in unnerstan'in me better, I, too, ha' been wantin' in unnerstan'in them better. When I got thy letter, I easily believen that what the yoong ledy sen and done to me, and what her brother sen and done to me, was one, and that there were a wicked plot betwixt 'em. When I fell, I were in anger wi' her, an hurryin' on t' be as onjust t' her as oothers was t' me. But in our judgments, like as in our doins, we mun bear and forbear. In my pain an trouble, lookin up yonder,—wi' it shinin' on me—I ha' seen more clear, and ha' made it my dyin prayer that aw th' world may on'y coom toogether more, an get a better unnerstan'in o' one another, than when I were in't my own weak seln."

Louisa hearing what he said, bent over him on the opposite side to Rachael, so that he could see her.

"You ha' heard?" he said, after a moment's silence. "I ha' not forgot you, ledy."

"Yes, Stephen, I have heard you. And your prayer is mine."

"You ha' a father. Will yo' tak' a message to him?"

"He is here," said Louisa, with dread. "Shall I bring him to you?"

"If yo please."

Louisa returned with her father. Standing hand in hand, they both looked down upon the solemn countenance.

"Sir, yo will clear me an mak my name good wi' aw men. This I leave to yo."

Mr. Gradgrind was troubled and asked how?

"Sir," was the reply: "yor son will tell yo how. Ask him. I mak no charges: I leave none ahint me: not a single word. I ha' seen an spok'n wi' yor son, one night. I ask no more o' yo than that yo clear me—an I trust to yo to do 't."

The bearers being now ready to carry him away, and the

surgeon being anxious for his removal, those who had torches or lanterns, prepared to go in front of the litter. Before it was raised, and while they were arranging how to go, he said to Rachael, looking upward at the star:

"Often as I coom to myseln, and found it shinin on me down there in my trouble, I thowt it were the star as guided to Our Saviour's home. I awmust think it be the very star!"

They lifted him up, and he was overjoyed to find that they were about to take him in the direction whither the star seemed to him to lead.

"Rachael, beloved lass! Don't let go my hand. We may walk together t'night, my dear!"

"I will hold thy hand, and keep beside thee, Stephen, all the way."

"Bless thee! Will soombody be pleased to coover my face!"

They carried him very gently along the fields, and down the lanes, and over the wide landscape; Rachael always holding the hand in hers. Very few whispers broke the mournful silence. It was soon a funeral procession. The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer's rest.

CHAPTER VII.

WHELP-HUNTING.

Before the ring formed round the Old Hell Shaft was broken, one figure had disappeared from within it. Mr. Bounderby and his shadow had not stood near Louisa, who held her father's arm, but in a retired place by themselves. When Mr. Gradgrind was summoned to the couch, Sissy, attentive to all that happened, slipped behind that wicked shadow—a sight in the horror of his face, if there had been eyes there for any sight but one—and whispered in his ear. Without turning his head, he conferred with her a few moments, and vanished. Thus the whelp had gone out of the circle before the people moved.

When the father reached home, he sent a message to Mr. Bounderby's, desiring his son to come to him directly. The reply was, that Mr. Bounderby having missed him in the crowd, and seeing nothing of him since, had supposed him to be at Stone Lodge.

"I believe, father," said Louisa, "he will not come back to town to-night." Mr. Gradgrind turned away, and said no more.

In the morning, he went down to the Bank himself as soon as it was opened, and seeing his son's place empty (he had not the courage to look in at first) went back along the street to meet Mr. Bounderby on his way there. To whom he said that, for reasons he would soon explain, but entreated not then to be asked for, he had found it necessary to employ his son at a distance for a little while. Also, that he was charged with the duty of vindicating Stephen Blackpool's memory, and declaring the thief. Mr. Bounderby, quite confounded, stood stock-still in the street after his father-in-law had left him, swelling like an immense soap-bubble, without its beauty.

Mr. Gradgrind went home, locked himself in his room, and kept it all that day. When Sissy and Louisa tapped at his door, he said, without opening it, "Not now, my dears; in the evening." On their return in the evening, he said, "I am not able yet—to-morrow." He ate nothing all day, and had no candle after dark; and they heard him walking to and fro late at night.

But, in the morning he appeared at breakfast at the usual hour, and took his usual place at the table. Aged and bent he looked, and quite bowed down; and yet he looked a wiser man, and a better man, than in the days when in this life he wanted nothing but Facts. Before he left the room, he appointed a time for them to come to him; and so, with his grey head drooping, went away.

"Dear father," said Louisa, when they kept their appointment, "you have three young children left. They will be different, *I* will be different yet, with Heaven's help."

She gave her hand to Sissy, as if she meant with her help too.

"Your wretched brother," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Do you think he had planned this robbery, when he went with you to the lodging?"

"I fear so, father. I know he had wanted money very much, and had spent a great deal."

"The poor man being about to leave town, it came into his evil brain to cast suspicion on him?"

"I think it must have flashed upon him while he sat there, father. For, I asked him to go there with me. The visit did not originate with him."

"He had some conversation with the poor man. Did he take him aside?"

"He took him out of the room. I asked him afterwards, why he had done so, and he made a plausible excuse; but since last night, father, and when I remember the circumstances by its light, I am afraid I can imagine too truly what passed between them."

"Let me know," said her father, "if your thoughts present your guilty brother in the same dark view as mine."

"I fear, father," hesitated Louisa, "that he must have made some representation to Stephen Blackpool—perhaps in my name, perhaps in his own—which induced him to do in good faith and honesty, what he had never done before, and to wait about the Bank those two or three nights before he left the town."

"Too plain!" returned the father. "Too plain!"

He shaded his face, and remained silent for some moments. Recovering himself, he said:

"And now, how is he to be found? How is he to be saved from justice? In the few hours that I can possibly allow to elapse before I publish the truth, how is he to be found by us, and only by us? Ten thousand pounds could not effect it."

"Sissy has effected it, father."

He raised his eyes to where she stood, like a good fairy in his house, and said in a tone of softened gratitude and grateful kindness, "It is always you, my child!"

"We had our fears," Sissy explained, glancing at Louisa, "before yesterday; and when I saw you brought to the side of the litter last night, and heard what passed (being close to Rachael all the time), I went to him when no one saw, and said to him, 'Don't look at me. See where your father is. Escape at once, for his sake and your own!' He was in a tremble before I whispered to him, and he started and trembled more then, and said, 'Where can I go? I have very little money, and I don't know who will

hide me!' I thought of father's old circus. I have not forgotten where Mr. Sleary goes at this time of year, and I read of him in a paper only the other day. I told him to hurry there, and tell his name, and ask Mr. Sleary to hide him till I came. 'I'll get to him before the morning,' he said. And I saw him shrink away among the people."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed his father. "He may be got abroad yet."

It was the more hopeful as the town to which Sissy had directed him was within three hours' journey of Liverpool, whence he could be swiftly despatched to any part of the world. But, caution being necessary in communicating with him—for there was a greater danger every moment of his being suspected now, and nobody could be sure at heart but that Mr. Bounderby himself, in a bullying vein of public zeal, might play a Roman part—it was consented that Sissy and Louisa should repair to the place in question, by a circuitous course, alone; and that the unhappy father, setting forth in an opposite direction, should get round to the same bourne by another and wider route. It was further agreed that he should not present himself to Mr. Sleary, lest his intentions should be mistrusted, or the intelligence of his arrival should cause his son to take flight anew; but, that the communication should be left to Sissy and Louisa to open; and that they should inform the cause of so much misery and disgrace, of his father's being at hand and of the purpose for which they had come. When these arrangements had been well considered and were fully understood by all three, it was time to begin to carry them into execution. Early in the afternoon, Mr. Gradgrind walked direct from his own house into the country, to be taken up on the line by which he was to travel; and at night the remaining two set forth upon their different course, encouraged by not seeing any face they knew.

The two travelled all night, except when they were left, for odd numbers of minutes, at branch-places, up illimitable flights of steps, or down wells—which was the only variety of those branches—and, early in the morning, were turned out on a swamp, a mile or two from the town they sought. From this dismal spot they were rescued by a savage old postilion, who happened to be up early, kicking a horse in a fly: and so were smuggled into the town by all the back lanes where the pigs lived: which, although not

a magnificent or even savoury approach, was, as is usual in such cases, the legitimate highway.

The first thing they saw on entering the town was the skeleton of Sleary's Circus. The company had departed for another town more than twenty miles off, and had opened there last night. The connection between the two places was by a hilly turnpike-road, and the travelling on that road was very slow. Though they took but a hasty breakfast, and no rest (which it would have been in vain to seek under such anxious circumstances), it was noon before they began to find the bills of Sleary's Horseriding on barns and walls, and one o'clock when they stopped in the market-place.

A Grand Morning Performance by the Riders, commencing at that very hour, was in course of announcement by the bellman as they set their feet upon the stones of the street. Sissy recommended that, to avoid making inquiries and attracting attention in the town, they should present themselves to pay at the door. If Mr. Sleary were taking the money, he would be sure to know her, and would proceed with discretion. If he were not he would be sure to see them inside; and, knowing what he had done with the fugitive, would proceed with discretion still.

Therefore, they repaired, with fluttering hearts, to the well-remembered booth. The flag with the inscription Sleary's Horseriding, was there; and the Gothic niche was there; but Mr. Sleary was not there. Master Kidderminster, grown too maturely turfy to be received by the wildest credulity as Cupid any more, had yielded to the invincible force of circumstances (and his beard), and, in the capacity of a man who made himself generally useful, presided on this occasion over the exchequer—having also a drum in reserve, on which to expend his leisure moments and superfluous forces. In the extreme sharpness of his look-out for base coin, Mr. Kidderminster, as at present situated, never saw anything but money; so Sissy passed him unrecognised, and they went in.

The Emperor of Japan, on a steady old white horse stencilled with black spots, was twirling five wash-hand basins at once, as it is the favourite recreation of that monarch to do. Sissy, though well acquainted with his Royal line, had no personal knowledge of the present Emperor, and his reign was peaceful. Miss Josephine Sleary, in her cele-

brated graceful Equestrian Tyrolean Flower-Act, was then announced by a new clown (who humorously said Cauliflower Act), and Mr. Sleary appeared, leading her in.

Mr. Sleary had only made one cut at the Clown with his long whip-lash, and the Clown had only said, "If you do it again, I'll throw the horse at you!" when Sissy was recognised both by father and daughter. But they got through the Act with great self-possession; and Mr. Sleary, saving for the first instant, conveyed no more expression into his locomotive eye than into his fixed one. The performance seemed a little long to Sissy and Louisa, particularly when it stopped to afford the Clown an opportunity of telling Mr. Sleary (who said "Indeed, sir!" to all his observations in the calmest way, and with his eye on the house), about two legs sitting on three legs looking at one leg, when in came four legs, and laid hold of one leg, and up got two legs, caught hold of three legs, and threw 'em at four legs, who ran away with one leg. For, although an ingenious Allegory relating to a butcher, a three-legged stool, a dog, and a leg of mutton, this narrative consumed time; and they were in great suspense. At last, however, little fair-haired Josephine made her curtsey amid great applause; and the Clown, left alone in the ring, had just warmed himself, and said, "Now, *I*'ll have a turn!" when Sissy was touched on the shoulder, and beckoned out.

She took Louisa with her; and they were received by Mr. Sleary in a very little private apartment, with canvas sides, a grass floor, and a wooden ceiling all aslant, on which the box company stamped their approbation, as if they were coming through. "Thethilia," said Mr. Sleary, who had brandy and water at hand, "it doth me good to thee you. You wath alwayth a favourite with uth, and you've done uth credith thinth the old timeth I'm thure. You mutht thee our people, my dear, afore we thpeak of bithnith, or they'll break their hearth—ethpethially the women. Here'th Jothphine hath been and got married to E. W. B. Childerth, and thee hath got a boy, and though he'th only three yearth old, he thtickth on to any pony you can bring againtht him. He'th named The Little Wonder of Thcolathtic Equitation; and if you don't hear of that boy at Athley'th, you'll hear of him at Parith. And you recollect Kidderminthter, that wath thought to be rather thweet upon yourthelf? Well. He'th married too Mar-

ried a widder. Old enough to be hith mother. Thee wath Tightrope, thee wath, and now thee'th nothing—on accounth of fat. They've got two children, tho we're thtrong in the Fairy bithnith and the Nurthery dodge. If you wath to thee our Children in the Wood, with their father and mother both a dyin' on a horthe—their uncle a rethieving of 'em ath hith wardth, upon a horthe—themthelvth both a goin' a blackberryin' on a horthe—and the Robinth a coming in to cover 'em with leavth, upon a horthe—you'd thay it wath the completetht thing ath ever you thet your eyeth on! And you remember Emma Gordon, my dear, ath wath a'moth a mother to you? Of courthe you do; I needn't athk. Well! Emma, thee lotht her huthband. He wath throw'd a heavy backfall off a Elephant in a thort of a Pagoda thing ath the Thultan of Indieth, and he never got the better of it; and thee married a thecond time—married a Cheethemonger ath fell in love with her from the front—and he'th a Overtheer and makin' a fortun."

These various changes, Mr. Sleary, very short of breath now, related with great heartiness, and with a wonderful kind of innocence, considering what a bleary and brandy-and-watery old veteran he was. Afterwards he brought in Josephine, and E. W. B. Childers (rather deeply lined in the jaws by daylight), and the Little Wonder of Scholastic Equitation, and in a word, all the company. Amazing creatures they were in Louisa's eyes, so white and pink of complexion, so scant of dress, and so demonstrative of leg; but it was very agreeable to see them crowding about Sissy, and very natural in Sissy to be unable to refrain from tears.

"There! Now Thethilia hath kithd all the children, and hugged all the women, thaken handth all round with all the men, clear, every one of you, and ring in the band for the thecond part!"

As soon as they were gone, he continued in a low tone. "Now, Thethilia, I don't athk to know any thecreth, but I thuppothe I may conthider thith to be Mith Thquire."

"This is his sister. Yes."

"And t'other on 'th daughter. That'h what I mean. Hope I thee you well, mith. And I hope the Thquire 'th well?"

"My father will be here soon," said Louisa, anxious to bring him to the point. "Is my brother safe?"

"Thafe and thound," he replied. "I want you jutht to take a peep at the Ring, mith, through here. Thethilia, you know the dodgeth; find a thpy-hole for yourthelf."

They each looked through a chink in the boards.

"That'h Jack the Giant Killer—piethe of comic infant bithnith," said Sleary. "There'th a property-houthe, you thee, for Jack to hide in; there'th my Clown with a thauthe-pan-lid and a thpit, for Jack'th thervant; there'th little Jack himthelf in a thplendid thoot of armour; there'th two comic black thervanth twithe ath big ath the houthe, to thand by it and to bring it in and clear it; and the Giant (a very ecthpenthive bathket one), he an't on yet. Now, do you thee 'em all?"

"Yes," they both said.

"Look at 'em again," said Sleary, "look at 'em well. You thee 'em all? Very good. Now, mith;" he put a form for them to sit on; "I have my opinionth, and the Thquire your father hath hith. I don't want to know what your brother'th been up to; ith better for me not to know. All I thay ith, the Thquire hath thood by Thethilia, and I'll thand by the Thquire. Your brother ith one o' them black thervanth."

Louisa uttered an exclamation, partly of distress, partly of satisfaction.

"Ith a fact," said Sleary, "and even knowin' it, you couldn't put your finger on him. Let the Thquire come. I thall keep your brother here after the performanth I thant undreth him, nor yet wath hith paint off. Let the Thquire come here after the performanth, or come here yourthelf after the performanth, and you thall find your brother, and have the whole plathe to talk to him in. Never mind the lookth of him, ath long ath he'th well hid."

Louisa, with many thanks and with a lightened load, detained Mr. Sleary no longer then. She left her love for her brother, with her eyes full of tears; and she and Sissy went away until later in the afternoon.

Mr. Gradgrind arrived within an hour afterwards. He too had encountered no one whom he knew; and was now sanguine with Sleary's assistance of getting his disgraced son to Liverpool in the night. As neither of the three could be his companion without almost identifying him under any disguise, he prepared a letter to a correspondent whom he could trust, beseeching him to ship the bearer off

at any cost, to North or South America, or any distant part of the world to which he could be the most speedily and privately despatched.

This done, they walked about, waiting for the Circus to be quite vacated; not only by the audience, but by the company and by the horses. After watching it a long time, they saw Mr. Sleary bring out a chair and sit down by the side-door, smoking; as if that were his signal that they might approach.

"Your thervant, Thquire," was his cautious salutation as they passed in. "If you want me you'll find me here. You muthn't mind your thon having a comic livery on."

They all three went in; and Mr. Gradgrind sat down forlorn, on the Clown's performing chair in the middle of the ring. On one of the back benches, remote in the subdued light and the strangeness of the place, sat the villanous whelp, sulky to the last, whom he had the misery to call his son.

In a preposterous coat, like a beadle's, with cuffs and flaps exaggerated to an unspeakable extent; in an immense waistcoat, knee-breeches, buckled shoes, and a mad cocked hat; with nothing fitting him, and everything of coarse material, moth-eaten and full of holes; with seams in his black face, where fear and heat had started through the greasy composition daubed all over it; anything so grimly, detestably, ridiculously shameful as the whelp in his comic livery, Mr. Gradgrind never could by any other means have believed in, weighable and measurable fact though it was. And one of his model children had come to this!

At first the whelp would not draw any nearer, but persisted in remaining up there by himself. Yielding at length, if any concession so suddenly made can be called yielding, to the entreaties of Sissy—for Louisa he disowned altogether—he came down, bench by bench, until he stood in the sawdust, on the verge of the circle, as far as possible, within its limits from where his father sat.

"How was this done?" asked the father.

"How was what done?" moodily answered the son.

"This robbery," said the father, raising his voice upon the word.

"I forced the safe myself over night, and shut it up ajar before I went away. I had had the key that was found, made long before. I dropped it that morning, that it

might be supposed to have been used. I didn't take the money all at once. I pretended to put my balance away every night, but I didn't. Now you know all about it."

"If a thunderbolt had fallen on me," said the father, "it would have shocked me less than this!"

"I don't see why," grumbled the son. "So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people, out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of its being a law. How can *I* help laws? You have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort yourself!"

The father buried his face in his hands, and the son stood in his disgraceful grotesqueness, biting straw: his hands, with the black partly worn away inside, looking like the hands of a monkey. The evening was fast closing in; and from time to time, he turned the whites of his eyes restlessly and impatiently towards his father. They were the only parts of his face that showed any life or expression, the pigment upon it was so thick.

"You must be got to Liverpool, and sent abroad."

"I suppose I must. I can't be more miserable anywhere," whimpered the whelp, "than I have been here, ever since I can remember. That's one thing."

Mr. Gradgrind went to the door, and returned with Sleary, to whom he submitted the question, How to get this deplorable object away?

"Why, I've been thinking of it, Thquire. There'th not muth time to lothe, tho you muth thay yeth or no. Ith over twenty mileth to the rail. There'th a coath in half an hour, that goeth *to* the rail, 'purpothe to cath the mail train. That train will take him right to Liverpool."

"But look at him," groaned Mr. Gradgrind. "Will any coach—"

"I don't mean that he thould go in comic livery," said Sleary. "Thay the word, and I'll make a Jothkin of him, out of the wardrobe, in five minutes."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Gradgrind.

"A Jothkin—a Carter. Make up your mind quick, Thquire. There'll be beer to feth. I've never met with nothing but beer ath'll ever clean a comic blackamoor."

Mr. Gradgrind rapidly assented; Mr. Sleary rapidly turned out from a box, a small frock, a felt hat, and other essentials; the whelp rapidly changed clothes behind a

screen of baize; Mr. Sleary rapidly brought beer, and washed him white again.

"Now," said Sleary, "come along to the coath, and jump up behind; I'll go with you there, and they'll thuppothe you one of my people. Thay farewell to your family, and tharp'th the word." With which he delicately retired.

"Here is your letter," said Mr. Gradgrind. "All necessary means will be provided for you. Atone, by repentance and better conduct, for the shocking action you have committed, and the dreadful consequences to which it has led. Give me your hand, my poor boy, and may God forgive you as I do!"

The culprit was moved to a few abject tears by these words and their pathetic tone. But, when Louisa opened her arms, he repulsed her afresh.

"Not you. I don't want to have anything to say to you!"

"O Tom, Tom, do we end so, after all my love!"

"After all your love!" he returned, obdurately. "Pretty love! Leaving old Bounderby to himself, and packing my best friend Mr. Harthouse off, and going home just when I was in the greatest danger. Pretty love that! Coming out with every word about our having gone to that place, when you saw the net was gathering round me. Pretty love that! You have regularly given me up. You never cared for me."

"Tharp'th the word!" said Sleary, at the door.

They all confusedly went out: Louisa crying to him that she forgave him, and loved him still, and that he would one day be sorry to have left her so, and glad to think of these her last words, far away: when some one ran against them. Mr. Gradgrind and Sissy, who were both before him while his sister yet clung to his shoulder, stopped and recoiled.

For, there was Bitzer, out of breath, his thin lips parted, his thin nostrils distended, his white eyelashes quivering, his colourless face more colourless than ever, as if he ran himself into a white heat, when other people ran themselves into a glow. There he stood, panting and heaving, as if he had never stopped since the night, now long ago, when he had run them down before.

"I'm sorry to interfere with your plans," said Bitzer, shaking his head, "but I can't allow myself to be done by horseriders. I must have young Mr. Tom; he mustn't be

got away by horseriders; here he is in a smock frock, and I must have him!"

By the collar, too, it seemed. For, so he took possession of him.

CHAPTER VIII.

PHILOSOPHICAL.

They went back into the booth, Sleary shutting the door to keep intruders out. Bitzer, still holding the paralysed culprit by the collar, stood in the Ring, blinking at his old patron through the darkness of the twilight.

"Bitzer," said Mr. Gradgrind, broken down, and miserably submissive to him, "have you a heart?"

"The circulation, sir," returned Bitzer, smiling at the oddity of the question, "couldn't be carried on without one. No man, sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood, can doubt that I have a heart."

"Is it accessible," cried Mr. Gradgrind, "to any compassionate influence?"

"It is accessible to Reason, sir," returned the excellent young man. "And to nothing else."

They stood looking at each other; Mr. Gradgrind's face as white as the pursuer's.

"What motive—even what motive in reason—can you have for preventing the escape of this wretched youth," said Mr. Gradgrind, "and crushing his miserable father? See his sister here. Pity us!"

"Sir," returned Bitzer, in a very business-like and logical manner, "since you ask me what motive I have in reason, for taking young Mr. Tom back to Coketown, it is only reasonable to let you know. I have suspected young Mr. Tom of this bank robbery from the first. I had had my eye upon him before that time, for I knew his ways. I have kept my observations to myself, but I have made them; and I have got ample proofs against him now, besides his running away, and besides his own confession, which I was just in time to overhear. I had the pleasure of watching your house yesterday morning, and following you here. I am going to take young Mr. Tom back to Coketown, in

order to deliver him over to Mr. Bounderby. Sir, I have no doubt whatever that Mr. Bounderby will then promote me to young Mr. Tom's situation. And I wish to have his situation, sir, for it will be a rise to me, and will do me good."

"If this is solely a question of self-interest with you——" Mr. Gradgrind began.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, sir," returned Bitzer; "but I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest. What you must always appeal to, is a person's self-interest. It's your only hold. We are so constituted. I was brought up in that catechism when I was very young, sir, as you are aware."

"What sum of money," said Mr. Gradgrind, "will you set against your expected promotion?"

"Thank you, sir," returned Bitzer, "for hinting at the proposal; but I will not set any sum against it. Knowing that your clear head would propose that alternative, I have gone over the calculations in my mind; and I find that to compound a felony, even on very high terms indeed, would not be as safe and good for me as my improved prospects in the Bank."

"Bitzer," said Mr. Gradgrind, stretching out his hands as though he would have said, See how miserable I am! "Bitzer, I have but one chance left to soften you. You were many years at my school. If, in remembrance of the pains bestowed upon you there, you can persuade yourself in any degree to disregard your present interest and release my son, I entreat and pray you to give him the benefit of that remembrance."

"I really wonder, sir," rejoined the old pupil in an argumentative manner, "to find you taking a position so untenable. My schooling was paid for; it was a bargain; and when I came away, the bargain ended."

It was a fundamental principle of the Gradgrind philosophy that everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever on any account to give anybody anything, or render anybody help without purchase. Gratitude was to be abolished, and the virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across a counter. And if we didn't get to Heaven that way, it was not a politico-economical place, and we had no business there

"I don't deny," added Bitzer, "that my schooling was cheap. But that comes right, sir. I was made in the cheapest market, and have to dispose of myself in the dearest."

He was a little troubled here, by Louisa and Sissy crying.

"Pray don't do that," said he, "it's of no use doing that: it only worries. You seem to think that I have some animosity against young Mr. Tom; whereas I have none at all. I am only going, on the reasonable grounds I have mentioned, to take him back to Coketown. If he was to resist, I should set up the cry of Stop Thief! But, he won't resist, you may depend upon it."

Mr. Sleary, who with his mouth open and his rolling eye as immovably jammed in his head as his fixed one, had listened to these doctrines with profound attention, here stepped forward.

"Thquire, you know perfectly well, and your daughter knowth perfectly well (better than you, becauthe I thed it to her), that I didn't know what your thon had done, and that I didn't want to know—I thed it wath better not, though I only thought, then, it wath thome thkylarking. However, thith young man having made it known to be a robbery of a bank, why, that'h a theriouth thing; muth too theriouth a thing for me to compound, ath thith young man hath very properly called it. Conthequently, Thquire, you muthn't quarrel with me if I take thith young man'th thide, and thay he'th right and there'th no help for it. But I tell you what I'll do, Thquire; I'll drive your thon and thith young man over to the rail, and prevent expothure here. I can't conthent to do more, but I'll do that."

Fresh lamentations from Louisa, and deeper affliction on Mr. Gradgrind's part, followed this desertion of them by their last friend. But, Sissy glanced at him with great attention; nor did she in her own breast misunderstand him. As they were all going out again, he favoured her with one slight roll of his movable eye, desiring her to linger behind. As he locked the door, he said excitedly:

"The Thquire thtood by you, Thethilia, and I'll thtand by the Thquire. More than that: thith ith a prethiouth rathcal, and belongth to that bluthtering Cove that my people nearly pitht out o' winder. It'll be a dark night; I've got a horthe that'll do anything but thpeak; I've got a pony that'll go fifteen mile an hour with Childerth driv-

ing of him; I've got a dog that'll keep a man to one plathe four-and-twenty hourth. Get a word with the young Thquire. Tell him, when he theeth our horthe begin to danthe, not to be afraid of being thpilt, but to look out for a pony-gig coming up. Tell him, when he theeth that gig clothe by, to jump down, and it'll take him off at a rattling pathe. If my dog leth thith young man thtir a peg on foot, I give him leave to go. And if my horthe ever thtirth from that thpot where he beginth a danthing, till the morning—I don't know him?—Tharp'th the word!"

The word was so sharp, that in ten minutes Mr. Childers, sauntering about the market-place in a pair of slippers, had his cue, and Mr. Sleary's equipage was ready. It was a fine sight, to behold the learned dog barking round it, and Mr. Sleary instructing him, with his one practicable eye, that Bitzer was the object of his particular attentions. Soon after dark they all three got in and started; the learned dog (a formidable creature) already pinning Bitzer with his eye, and sticking close to the wheel on his side, that he might be ready for him in the event of his showing the slightest disposition to alight.

The other three set up at the inn all night in great suspense. At eight o'clock in the morning Mr. Sleary and the dog reappeared: both in high spirits.

"All right, Thquire!" said Mr. Sleary, "your thon may be aboard-a-thip by thith time. Childerth took him off, an hour and a half after we left here latht night. The horthe danthed the polka till he wath dead beat (he would have walthed if he hadn't been in harneth), and then I gave him the word and he went to thleep comfortable. When that prethiouth young Rathcal thed he'd go for'ard afoot, the dog hung on to hith neck-hankercher with all four legth in the air and pulled him down and rolled him over. Tho he come back into the drag, and there he that, 'till I turned the horthe'th head, at half-patht thixth thith morning."

Mr. Gradgrind overwhelmed him with thanks, of course; and hinted as delicately as he could, at a handsome remuneration in money.

"I don't want money mythelf, Thquire; but Childerth ith a family man, and if you wath to like to offer him a five-pound note, it mightn't be unactheptable. Likewithe if you wath to thtand a collar for the dog, or a thet of bellth for the horthe, I thould be very glad to take 'em. Brandy

and water I alwayth take." He had already called for a glass, and now called for another. "If you wouldn't think it going too far, Thquire, to make a little thpread for the company at about three and thixth a head, not reckoning Luth, it would make 'em happy."

All these little tokens of his gratitude, Mr. Gradgrind very willingly undertook to render. Though he thought them far too slight, he said, for such a service.

"Very well, Thquire; then, if you'll only give a Horthe-riding, a bethpeak, whenever you can, you'll more than balanthe the account. Now, Thquire, if your daughter will ethcuthe me, I thould like one parting word with you."

Louisa and Sissy withdrew into an adjoining room; Mr. Sleary, stirring and drinking his brandy and water as he stood, went on:

"Thquire, you don't need to be told that dogth ith wonderful animalth."

"Their instinct," said Mr. Gradgrind, "is surprising."

"Whatever you call it—and I'm bletht if *I* know what to call it"—said Sleary, "it ith athtonithing. The way in with a dog'll find you—the dithtanthe he'll come!"

"His scent," said Mr. Gradgrind, "being so fine."

"I'm bletht if I know what to call it," repeated Sleary, shaking his head, "but I have had dogth find me, Thquire, in a way that made me think whether that dog hadn't gone to another dog, and thed, 'You don't happen to know a perthon of the name of Thleary, do you? Perthon of the name of Thleary, in the Horthe-Riding way—thtout man—game eye?' And whether that dog mightn't have thed, 'Well, I can't thay I know him mythelf, but I know a dog that I think would be likely to be acquainted with him.' And whether that dog mightn't have thought it over, and thed, 'Thleary, Thleary! O yeth, to be sure! A friend of mine menthioned him to me at one time. I can get you hith addreth directly.' In conthequenth of my being afore the public, and going about tho muth, you thee, there mutht be a number of dogth acquainted with me, Thquire, that *I* don't know!"

Mr. Gradgrind seemed to be quite confounded by this speculation.

"Anyway," said Sleary, after putting his lips to his brandy and water, "ith fourteen months ago, Thquire, thinthe we wath at Chethter. We wath getting up our

Children in the Wood one morning, when there cometh into our Ring, by the thtage door, a dog. He had travelled a long way, he wath in very bad condithon, he wath lame, and pretty well blind. He went round to our children, one after another, as if he wath a-theeking for a child he know'd; and then he come to me, and throwd hithelf up behind, and thtood on hith two forelegth, weak ath he wath, and then he wagged hith tail and died. Thquire, that dog wath Merrylegth."

"Sissy's father's dog!"

"Thethilia'th father'th old dog. Now, Thquire, I can take my oath, from my knowledge of that dog, that that man wath dead—and buried—afore that dog come back to me. Joth'phine and Childerth and me talked it over a long time, whether I thould write or not. But we agreed, 'No. There'th nothing comfortable to tell; why unthettle her mind, and make her unhappy?' Tho, whether her father bathely detherted her; or whether he broke hith own heart alone, rather than pull her down along with him; never will be known, now, Thquire, till—no, not till we know how the dogth findth uth out!"

"She keeps the bottle that he sent her for, to this hour; and she will believe in his affection to the last moment of her life," said Mr. Gradgrind.

"It theemth to prethent two thingth to a perthon, don't it, Thquire?" said Mr. Sleary, musing as he looked down into the depths of his brandy and water: "one, that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-intereth after all, but thomething very different; t'other, that it hath a way of ith own of calculating or not calculating, whith thomehow or another ith at leatht ath hard to give a name to, ath the wayth of the dogth ith!"

Mr. Gradgrind looked out of window, and made no reply. Mr. Sleary emptied his glass and recalled the ladies.

"Thethilia my dear, kith me and good-bye! Mith Thquire, to thee you treating of her like a thithter, and a thithter that you truth and honour with all your heart and more, ith a very pretty thight to me. I hope your brother may live to be better detherving of you, and a greater comfort to you. Thquire, thake handth, firtht and latht! Don't be croth with uth poor vagabondth. People muth be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it.

You *mutht* have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the betht of uth; not the wurtht!

"And I never thought before," said Mr. Sleary, putting his head in at the door again to say it, "that I wath tho muth of a Cackler!"

CHAPTER IX.

FINAL.

It is a dangerous thing to see anything in the sphere of a vain blusterer, before the vain blusterer sees it himself. Mr. Bounderby felt that Mrs. Sparsit had audaciously anticipated him, and presumed to be wiser than he. Inappeasably indignant with her for her triumphant discovery of Mrs. Pegler, he turned this presumption, on the part of a woman in her dependent position, over and over in his mind, until it accumulated with turning like a great snowball. At last he made the discovery that to discharge this highly connected female—to have it in his power to say, "She was a woman of family, and wanted to stick to me, but I wouldn't have it, and got rid of her"—would be to get the utmost possible amount of crowning glory out of the connection, and at the same time to punish Mrs. Sparsit according to her deserts.

Filled fuller than ever, with this great idea, Mr. Bounderby came in to lunch, and sat himself down in the dining-room of former days, where his portrait was. Mrs. Sparsit sat by the fire, with her foot in her cotton stirrup, little thinking whither she was posting.

Since the Pegler affair, this gentlewoman had covered her pity for Mr. Bounderby, with a veil of quiet melancholy and contrition. In virtue thereof, it had become her habit to assume a woful look, which woful look she now bestowed upon her patron.

"What's the matter now, ma'am?" said Mr. Bounderby, in a very short, rough way.

"Pray, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "do not bite my nose off."

"Bite your nose off, ma'am?" repeated Mr. Bounderby.

"*Your* nose!" meaning, as Mrs. Sparsit conceived, that it was too developed a nose for the purpose. After which offensive implication, he cut himself a crust of bread, and threw the knife down with a noise.

Mrs. Sparsit took her foot out of her stirrup, and said, "Mr. Bounderby, sir!"

"Well, ma'am?" retorted Mr. Bounderby. "What are you staring at?"

"May I ask, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, "have you been ruffled this morning?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"May I inquire, sir," pursued the injured woman, "whether *I* am the unfortunate cause of your having lost your temper?"

"Now, I'll tell you what, ma'am," said Bounderby, "I am not come here to be bullied. A female may be highly connected, but she can't be permitted to bother and badger a man in my position, and I am not going to put up with it." (Mr. Bounderby felt it necessary to get on: foreseeing that if he allowed of details, he would be beaten.)

Mrs. Sparsit first elevated, then knitted, her Coriolanian eyebrows; gathered up her work into its proper basket; and rose.

"Sir," said she, majestically. "It is apparent to me that I am in your way at present. I will retire to my own apartment."

"Allow me to open the door, ma'am."

"Thank you, sir; I can do it for myself."

"You had better allow me, ma'am," said Bounderby, passing her, and getting his hand upon the lock; "because I can take the opportunity of saying a word to you, before you go. Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, I rather think you are cramped here, do you know? It appears to me, that, under my humble roof, there's hardly opening enough for a lady of your genius in other people's affairs."

Mrs. Sparsit gave him a look of the darkest scorn, and said with great politeness, "Really, sir?"

"I have been thinking it over, you see, since the late affairs have happened, ma'am," said Bounderby; "and it appears to my poor judgment——"

"Oh! Pray, sir," Mrs. Sparsit interposed, with sprightly cheerfulness, "don't disparage your judgment. Everybody knows how unerring Mr. Bounderby's judgment is. Every-

body has had proofs of it. It must be the theme of general conversation. Disparage anything in yourself but your judgment, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, laughing.

Mr. Bounderby, very red and uncomfortable, resumed:

"It appears to me, ma'am, I say, that a different sort of establishment altogether would bring out a lady of *your* powers. Such an establishment as your relation, Lady Scadgers's, now. Don't you think you might find some affairs there, ma'am, to interfere with?"

"It never occurred to me before, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit; "but now you mention it, I should think it highly probable."

"Then suppose you try, ma'am," said Bounderby, laying an envelope with a cheque in it in her little basket. "You can take your own time for going, ma'am; but perhaps in the meanwhile, it will be more agreeable to a lady of your powers of mind, to eat her meals by herself, and not to be intruded upon. I really ought to apologise to you—being only Josiah Bounderby of Coketown—for having stood in your light so long."

"Pray don't name it, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit. "If that portrait could speak, sir—but it has the advantage over the original of not possessing the power of committing itself and disgusting others,—it would testify, that a long period has elapsed since I first habitually addressed it as the picture of a Noodle. Nothing that a Noodle does, can awaken surprise or indignation; the proceedings of a Noodle can only inspire contempt."

Thus saying, Mrs. Sparsit, with her Roman features like a medal struck to commemorate her scorn of Mr. Bounderby, surveyed him fixedly from head to foot, swept disdainfully past him, and ascended the staircase. Mr. Bounderby closed the door, and stood before the fire; projecting himself after his old explosive manner into his portrait—and into futurity.

Into how much of futurity? He saw Mrs. Sparsit fighting out a daily fight at the points of all the weapons in the female armoury, with the grudging, smarting, peevish, tormenting Lady Scadgers, still laid up in bed with her mysterious leg, and gobbling her insufficient income down by about the middle of every quarter, in a mean little airless lodging, a mere closet for one, a mere crib for two; but did

he see more? Did he catch any glimpse of himself making a show of Bitzer to strangers, as the rising young man, so devoted to his master's great merits, who had won young Tom's place, and had almost captured young Tom himself, in the times when by various rascals he was spirited away? Did he see any faint reflection of his own image making a vainglorious will, whereby five-and-twenty Humbugs, past five-and-fifty years of age, each taking upon himself the name, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, should for ever dine in Bounderby Hall, for ever lodge in Bounderby Buildings, for ever attend a Bounderby chapel, for ever go to sleep under a Bounderby chaplain, for ever be supported out of a Bounderby estate, and for ever nauseate all healthy stomachs, with a vast amount of Bounderby balderdash and bluster? Had he any prescience of the day, five years to come, when Josiah Bounderby of Coketown was to die of a fit in the Coketown street, and this same precious will was to begin its long career of quibble, plunder, false pretences, vile example, little service and much law? Probably not. Yet the portrait was to see it all out.

Here was Mr. Gradgrind on the same day, and in the same hour, sitting thoughtful in his own room. How much futurity did *he* see? Did he see himself, a white-haired decrepit man, bending his hitherto inflexible theories to appointed circumstances; making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and Charity; and no longer trying to grind that Heavenly trio in his dusty little mills? Did he catch sight of himself, therefore much despised by his late political associates? Did he see them, in the era of its being quite settled that the national dustmen have only to do with one another, and owe no duty to an abstraction called a People, "taunting the honourable gentleman" with this and with that and with what not, five nights a week, until the small hours of the morning? Probably he had that much foreknowledge knowing his men.

Here was Louisa on the night of the same day, watching the fire as in days of yore, though with a gentler and a humbler face. How much of the future might arise before *her* vision? Broadsides in the streets, signed with her father's name, exonerating the late Stephen Blackpool, weaver, from misplaced suspicion, and publishing the guilt of his own son, with such extenuation as his years and

temptation (he could not bring himself to add, his education) might beseech; were of the Present. So, Stephen Blackpool's tombstone, with her father's record of his death, was almost of the Present, for she knew it was to be. These things she could plainly see. But, how much of the Future?

A working woman, christened Rachael, after a long illness once again appearing at the ringing of the Factory bell, and passing to and fro at the set hours, among the Coketown Hands; a woman of pensive beauty, always dressed in black, but sweet-tempered and serene, and even cheerful; who, of all the people in the place, alone appeared to have compassion on a degraded, drunken wretch of her own sex, who was sometimes seen in the town secretly begging of her, and crying to her; a woman working, ever working, but content to do it, and preferring to do it as her natural lot, until she should be too old to labour any more? Did Louisa see this? Such a thing was to be.

A lonely brother, many thousands of miles away, writing, on paper blotted with tears, that her words had too soon come true, and that all the treasures in the world would be cheaply bartered for a sight of her dear face? At length this brother coming nearer home, with hope of seeing her, and being delayed by illness; and then a letter, in a strange hand, saying "he died in hospital, of fever, such a day, and died in penitence and love of you: his last word being your name"? Did Louisa see these things? Such things were to be.

Herself again a wife—a mother—lovingly watchful of her children, ever careful that they should have a childhood of the mind no less than a childhood of the body, as knowing it to be even a more beautiful thing, and a possession, any hoarded scrap of which, is a blessing and happiness to the wisest? Did Louisa see this? Such a thing was never to be.

But, happy Sissy's happy children loving her; all children loving her; she, grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national pros-

perity figures can show, will be the Writing on the Wall,—she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, or fancy fair; but simply as a duty to be done,—did Louisa see these things of herself? These things were to be.

Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold.

NOTES ON HARD TIMES.

Dickens submitted to Forster the following alternative titles for his contemplated novel, with a view to obtaining his opinion as to the most suitable. "It seems to me," he wrote, "that there are three very good ones among them. I should like to know whether you hit upon the same."

1. According to Cocker.
2. Prove It.
3. Stubborn Things.
4. Mr. Gradgrind's Facts.
5. The Grindstone.
6. Hard Times.
7. Two and Two are Four.
8. Something Tangible.
9. Our Hard-headed Friend.
10. Rust and Dust.
11. Simple Arithmetic.
12. A Matter of Calculation.
13. A Mere Question of Figures.
14. The Gradgrind Philosophy.

The three titles selected by Forster were Nos. 2, 6, and 11; the three preferred by Dickens were Nos. 6, 13, and 14; and as No. 6 had been favoured by both that title was determined upon. Other designations were also considered, such as: Fact; Hard-headed Gradgrind; Hard Heads and Soft Hearts; Heads and Tales; Black and White; but these were speedily discarded as being inappropriate.

BOOK THE FIRST.

CHAPTER V.

Coketown.

It is interesting to know that Coketown, where the principal incidents of "Hard Times" take place, was intended as a representation of Manchester.

CHAPTER VI.

"Beneath that inscription again, in a flowing scroll, the painter had touched off the lines."

It was pointed out by the late Robert Langton, author

of "The Childhood and Youth of Charles Dickens," that the inscription on the sign of the Pegasus's Arms, at which inn Sleary's circus company put up, "Good malt makes good beer," etc., was taken from an old sign, the Malt Shovel, existing until 1882 at the foot of Chatham Hill.

CHAPTER XIII.

Stephen and Rachael.

Mrs. Margaret O. W. Oliphant, who generally disparaged Dickens, said of this tale that it "contains in the episode of Stephen and Rachael one of the best pieces of serious writing which Dickens ever did."

CHAPTER X.

The Lancashire dialect.

Robert Langton states that Dickens, in "Hard Times," is unsuccessful in his attempt to render the Lancashire dialect—that the utterances put into the mouths of Stephen Blackpool and others in the book "are very far from being correct," a matter upon which, from his long residence in Manchester, that critic is qualified to speak.

BOOK THE THIRD.

CHAPTER IX.

The final chapter was written at Boulogne in July, 1854, and in a note to Forster (written just before the close of the tale) the Author said: "I am three parts mad, and the fourth delirious, with perpetual rushing at 'Hard Times.' I have done what I hope is a good thing with Stephen, taking his story as a whole; and hope to be over in town with the end of the book on Wednesday night. . . . I have been looking forward through so many weeks and sides of paper to this Stephen business, that now—as usual—it being over, I feel as if nothing in the world, in the way of intense and violent rushing hither and thither, could quite restore my balance."

On completing his "socialistic romance," as it has been termed, Dickens journeyed to London for a brief spell, proposing to pass that interval—as he previously notified

Wilkie Collins—"in a career of amiable dissipation and unbounded license in the metropolis." "If you will come and breakfast with me about midnight," he added—"anywhere—any day, and go to bed no more until we fly to these pastoral retreats, I shall be delighted to have so vicious an associate."

An adaptation of "Hard Times" by a Mr. Fox Cooper, produced in London in 1854, is described by Charles Dickens the Younger as "indeed a remarkable work, concluding with a general all-round explanation at the mouth of the Old Hill Shaft, in the course of which Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind use a good deal of strong language to one another and incidentally engage in a vigorous pugilistic encounter. Stephen Blackpool does not die, but marries Rachael at the instigation of Bounderby, who also promises £150 as a marriage portion—curiously overlooking the existence of the first Mrs. Blackpool altogether. Tom Gradgrind replaces the stolen money by Louisa's help, and the explanation that he had only moved it from one place to another seems to satisfy everybody —while it absolutely destroys all the point of the story —and Louisa, still more to the confusion of the original author's plan, goes back to Bounderby. The 'tag' is so delightful in its unconscious absurdity that it deserves quotation in full. It runs thus:

'*Louisa.* Mr. Bounderby, I will now cheerfully accompany you back to the home you have provided for me, and must insist upon it that you allow your good mother to supply the place of Mrs. Sparsit.

'*Bounderby.* Well said, Louisa; and that this may prove a week of happiness and rejoicing, I suspend work at the factory for seven days.

'*Omnes.* Huzza! Huzza!

'*Bounderby.* But I will pay full wages during all the time to every man, woman, and child, and my wife Louisa shall distribute amongst you all £200, to be spent in providing you with a few necessaries and comforts these "Hard Times."

'*Omnes.* Huzza! Huzza!

'(*Picture to end. Music. Curtain.*)'"

THE END.

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